

guided evolution

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"The spider bite is still pulsing, and Tommy hopes that whatever venom he's been injected with doesn't, say, end his very short life where he stands. Or, well, lays. Eventually, though, the exhaustion wins over, and Tommy's stomach churns with anxiety. He really hopes Phil's not going to come in with acetaminophen in the morning to find him dead. That would be a rather shitty experience for the both of them."

In which crimes will be fought, predictable enemies and unlikely allies alike will be made, and tiny cow plushies will be revered.

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Chapter 1: tarantulas on the tube line

Now, Tommy's no expert in bug bites, but he's, like, ninety-nine percent sure that a spider bite shouldn't look like this. To be fair, he's also never been bitten by a spider before, but that's besides the point. And he's not about to kill the thing either, even if it *had* attacked him completely unprovoked, which is absolutely outrageous.

Well. Maybe not *completely* unprovoked.

So what if Tommy had been snooping around in an area of the tube line he's absolutely not supposed to be in? And so what if he'd found a funky-looking lab in one of the abandoned areas of the track? Granted, yeah, maybe he shouldn't have jumped at the sound of skittering-which had turned out to be a mouse poking around the room-and unintentionally knocked over a glass case. But it hadn't been his fault that a spider the size of his fucking *hand* had instantly latched onto his arm. And yeah, okay, trying to pet the spider may not have been the *best* course of action, but before he could even move his hand close enough to brush against it, the fucker had chomped down on his arm!

Tommy had then proceeded to swear his head off and gently set the spider down on the ground and pace and panic over the bite for a couple of minutes. It moves barely two feet away, where it now promptly falls over in place and dies. So much for trying to be careful with it. But here he is, with a lump in his arm that's been swelling for the past eight and a half minutes, and Tommy's left wondering how the fuck he's going to sneak back into his room *and* hide a big red lump the size of a hummingbird on his arm. Because, once again, he's definitely not supposed to be down here, and he's *also* definitely not supposed to be-albeit unsuccessfully-befriending spiders either, not after The Incident in Phil's office building a few weeks ago.

But he's snuck back home under worse conditions, so he supposes it can't really hurt to just leave the weird lab-looking place alone and get the hell out of dodge before this ends worse than one of Techno's myth books with the weirdos that cheat on each other all the time. Christ, his arm feels awful, though. It's gonna be a pain in the ass to climb through his window with this fucking lump, but as long as he doesn't get caught again, it should be fine. Plus, Tommy's totally a professional at this by now. Truly the best in the business, as they say.

In any case, it's *definitely* getting late now, so Tommy ducks out of the abandoned area and heads back to the platform, slipping out of the station with little notice from bystanders. After all, who's gonna take the time out of their day to dash after some kid clutching his arm and making a mad dash for the exit? Everyone else has much better things to do than that, and Tommy definitely goes completely and totally unnoticed because he's an absolute master of stealth. One of the platform guards definitely doesn't start to ask after him as Tommy hurries past, hand still clasped around the bright red lump causing an ever-stabbing pain in his bicep.

The house isn't too far, thankfully, and Tommy's starting to feel a little woozy-maybe he *should* tell Phil he's been bitten by a giant spider, but he doesn't really want to go through all the fussing. It's unnecessary, really, it is, he's a big man after all, he can handle a little scrape or two on his own. He doesn't need seven bandages and twelve days of bed rest, *Phil*. In any case, while the window seems higher than usual, Tommy scales his way back up the side of the house, the backyard spinning in his peripheral vision, and slips in through his still-open window.

It's quite funny actually, now that he thinks about it; the room's spinning as well, and Tommy sits down on his bed and takes his hand off of the spider bite, taking a good look at it for the first time since the station. And oh *boy*, it's not looking good. He should *definitely* be telling someone about it. His veins are visible under the raised bump, kind of mesmerizing as they glow red and pulse almost rhythmically beneath his skin. Tommy reaches out to touch it again, with his fingertips just barely brushing against it, but he flinches back at the sensation-he can only really think to compare it to a static

shock when it happens.

The room actually swirls now, and Tommy thinks it wise that he lay down on his bed, weird spider bite bump notwithstanding, thank you very much. It's not the spider bite making him tired, it's simply the fact that it's nearing eleven in the evening, and this is typically when Phil comes up to check on him, and Tommy can hide the spider bite underneath his bed covers. A purely strategic move, nothing more. This is absolutely *not* spurred on by the raging headache he's suddenly got coming on.

Said headache worsens with the sound of the door creaking slowly open. Tommy should probably ask Techno if he's got any oil for the hinges-mans oils his collection of swords enough to make 'em America's next target, he's bound to have some extra lying around. Regardless, the edge of Tommy's bed dips with someone's weight, and his hair is getting brushed out of his face. "Hey, mate, you headin' to bed?" Phil asks, and Tommy hums. He's definitely not too tired and woozy to respond. Not at all. "Toms? Are you feeling okay? You're being quiet, that's not like you."

Tommy huffs and forces his eyes open as wide as they can go. He's squinting. "Fuck off, old man," he tries to say, but it sounds more like an incoherent jumble of syllables. Hm. Maybe he *really* should have shown Phil the spider bite before his arms had started to feel like lead. Now, he's just hoping he goes back to normal before tomorrow morning. He's got classes to get to, things to learn, Tubbos to bother.

Phil frowns down at him and settles a hand on Tommy's forehead, drawing it back almost as soon as it had touched him. "Shit, Tommy, you're burning up," he says, brow furrowed. Tommy grumbles something equally incoherent, and Phil shakes his head. "You definitely can't go to school like this, you're absolutely staying home tomorrow. And I don't wanna hear a word out of you about it either, there's no way your fever's gonna fix itself overnight."

Just about ready to pass out, Tommy pouts, but shuts his eyes anyway. Phil ruffles his hair, and Tommy's head screams as the door creaks closed. His entire body feels like it's imploding, like his muscles are being twisted around and turned inside out. His veins

feel like they're pumping molasses through his body, and his eyes are stinging. Everything sounds and smells like too much, even opening his eyes just a sliver is overwhelming; Tommy's not sure whether he's hallucinating or if he really can hear Phil's typing or Techno's huffs of laughter or Wilbur's humming, all from downstairs.

It's definitely his imagination, but he *swears* he can smell the bug-repellant candle that Wil always forgets is burning on the back porch. And while his brain *insists* that the smell of Techno's dye-sensitive shampoo is right in his face, that's just objectively untrue. Tommy feels like absolute garbage, and every sense of his being completely overwhelmed by *so much* is definitely not helping. The spider bite is still pulsing, and Tommy hopes that whatever venom he's been injected with doesn't, say, end his very short life where he stands. Or, well, lays.

Eventually, though, the exhaustion wins over, and Tommy's stomach churns with anxiety. He really hopes Phil's not going to come in with acetaminophen in the morning to find him dead. That would be a rather shitty experience for the both of them.

Thankfully, Tommy does not, in fact, die.

Instead, he wakes up to the smell of pancakes and syrup, and a lazy grin stretches across his still half-asleep face as he shifts to open his eyes, expecting Phil to be standing in his doorway with a plate of breakfast like he always does when one of them happens to be sick. To Tommy's utter confusion, though, his door is closed and the barest hint of daylight peeking from the curtains illuminates the otherwise empty bedroom. The smell of his breakfast is absolutely *overwhelming*, though-it's as if he's sticking his nose barely a millimeter above it and taking as deep of a breath as he can.

The next thing that becomes apparent to Tommy is that he feels absolutely fine. Invigorated, in fact. And as he goes to check the spider bite from last night, all that remains of it is a smooth pink scar, no larger than a pinprick. Odd, considering that the bite had been around the same size as a goddamned snow globe the last time he'd checked on it. Alright, well, maybe not *that* big, but big enough

to be absolutely mortifying. Tommy feels relief flood through him in spite of his curiosity about the bite, and he lets go of the covers to let them fall back over him.

Or, he tries to, at least.

The damn thing is stuck to his hand.

Tommy hasn't spilled anything on it recently-he's been banned from bringing Coke up to his room at all after so many incidents, as a matter of fact-and he knows for sure that his hands aren't the culprit here, given that they'd picked things up and put them down just fine last night. He shakes his hand a bit in the air, hoping the cover will fall from his hand with little intervention, but it seems pretty stubbornly stuck to his fingers. It falls from Tommy's palm, only attached to the very tips of his fingers, which, Tommy recognizes, is definitely not a normal thing for his bed covers to do. He shakes his hand a little more vigorously, swearing under his breath when that does absolutely nothing but jostle the few odds and ends perched precariously on the edge of his bed.

The door starts to open, and the creak of it claws at his eardrums. Tommy throws his hands-or *hand*, the other one is still stuck firmly to his covers, which actually does a pretty decent job of muffling the noise-over his ears and squeezes his eyes shut as tight as he can. The light flooding in from the hallway is also incredibly grating. "Toms? Have you got a headache, mate?" Phil says, sounding as though he's right next to Tommy, though when Tommy manages to open his eyes and adjust them to the light after a few moments, Phil's standing worriedly in the doorway with a tray full of breakfast that absolutely *stinks*.

A shame, really. Tommy had really been looking forward to those pancakes and now all he can smell is the sickening scent of nothing but syrupy sugar. Now he's nauseous as well. *Fuck*. He'd really thought he might've been able to talk his way into going to school today. Alas, fate has decided he must be fussed over for eight straight hours instead. Tommy nearly gags as Phil steps closer, the smell of the syrup absolutely *annihilating* his nose. Seriously, it should be a criminal offense or something to put that much sugar in maple fucking syrup.

When Tommy realizes Phil is still looking for a response-and that his fucking bedsheet is still attached to his hand-he abruptly drops both hands back into his lap and blinks his eyes open, though he winces at the light still flooding in from the hall. "My fuckin' eyes, Phil, Jesus, close the fucking-oh my *God*, the door, the fucking door!" he groans, his own voice sounding like nails on a goddamn chalkboard. Phil sets the horror show of a tray down on Tommy's bedside table and hurries over to the door, gently letting it close and wincing just as Tommy does when the hinges scream again.

"Sorry about that," Phil says, his tone the same as when he's talking softly, though the volume of it is just a little louder than normal. He smiles down at Tommy and pulls his desk chair over so he can sit at Tommy's bedside. So fucking fussy. Tommy lets him, though, because while he's *definitely* not afraid of whatever the fuck is going on with his senses, Phil looks like he'll implode with worry if Tommy tells him to fuck off. Brows furrowed and smile clearly half-forced, Phil gestures to the tray beside them. "Have something to eat, it'll help."

"Absolutely fucking not, Phil, that *reeks*," Tommy informs him, and Phil makes a face like he doesn't know what the fuck Tommy's talking about. A bit pissed off now, Tommy points at the offending syrup and scowls. "I'm not fucking eating that shit, it's gotta be fuckin' expired or something-it *stinks*, man, you can't *not* smell it, I-stop looking at me like that, I'm not crazy! Smell it, go on, you fucking-you'll see, Phil, just smell it!"

Looking as though he'd rather be doing literally anything else right now, Phil raises a brow and sticks his nose directly above the pancakes, and he makes a right show of taking a whiff. He doesn't react whatsoever, and now Tommy understands why Phil's looking at him like he's gone mad. "It just smells like good cooking to me, mate, but if you'd rather I make you something else, then that's no problem," Phil says in that same infuriating gentle tone, but he's still being too loud.

"You're being too fuckin' loud, I can't hear myself *think*," Tommy whines, rubbing at his face with his free hand and very pointedly keeping his other hand in a totally natural and not at all awkward-looking position on the bedsheets. "Seriously, mans got a massive

goddamn headache, I don't need you yelling at me on top of it, Phil, fucking Christ..."

"Toms, I'm not yelling," Phil murmurs, and *that's* the level of volume Tommy had expected to come with the gentle tone of voice. Matter of fact, Phil almost seems like he's whispering, but that's preposterous. He's been too damn loud for all of the ten minutes Tommy's been awake for. "You *really* must be feeling like shit, hm? I called ahead and told the school you'd be out today, glad I took care of that now rather than later."

Tommy hesitantly nods and chances a whiff of the orange juice beside the pancakes. It smells much more citrus-y than normal, but it definitely doesn't smell nearly as bad as the rest of Phil's horrific breakfast. He chances a sip of it and finds that it tastes absolutely *incredible*. Tommy's tempted to ask whether this is the good kind of juice or the shitty store brand they usually buy, but he's worried that Phil will look at him like he's clinically insane again. In any case, maybe the pancakes will taste better than they smell.

He debates over it for a moment, and Phil raises a brow at him again, and Tommy shoves his shoulder, eyes widening when his free hand sticks to Phil's green robe just like his other hand had attached itself to the bedspread. A nervous smile on his face, Tommy attempts to make it look like a totally normal gesture of him putting a hand on Phil's shoulder. Because that's definitely a thing he's known for doing. "Uh, thanks, old man," he says, voice wavering a little and much quieter than it normally is, judging by Phil's very obviously surprised expression. Tommy's hand, the damn traitor, does not let go despite his best efforts to force it to. "Also, give me your robe, please."

"Wha-? Why do you want my robe?" Phil asks him, completely bewildered. Tommy wracks his brain for an excuse and stares at Henry, who's teetering on the edge of his bed. The tiny eyes of the cow plush stare back at him, and Tommy can almost feel the bedsheets finally, *finally* drop from his grip. "Uh, earth to Tommy? Are you going to explain why you want my robe or am I going to have to get Techno in here to interrogate you?"

"I'm cold," Tommy blurts, a blatant lie, but evidently, Phil still

believes he's sick enough to be giving delayed responses. He now has a free hand again, but his other hand is still sticking firmly to Phil's robe. "I am the coldest I have ever been, Phil, I'm quite sick, you see, and I *have* to have your robe. Right now. For my sickness. And also healing purposes. I will never recover in this terrible arctic weather, Phil, you *must* understand. My *sinuses*, Phil."

Phil eyes him skeptically for a moment, but he shrugs off the robe-Tommy still clutching it in a way that definitely does not cause any further suspicion to arise-and lets Tommy take it. "You've a sinus headache? Might have to schedule a doctor's appointment then," he says, and Tommy stifles a snort at Phil's... eclectic choice of pyjamas. *Number One Crow Dad* is written across his chest in what's clearly a five-year-old's attempt at letters. Whether it's Wilbur's or Techno's from years ago is anybody's guess. "Right, well, you go ahead and eat, mate, I'll grab some medicine to help with your head, yeah?"

Tommy nods, and Phil ruffles his hair before slipping through the door-he opens it as little as possible, which Tommy appreciates. The light isn't too bad when there's only a bit of it. The pancakes beside him still reek, but if Tommy breathes through his mouth, the smell isn't nearly as bad. He takes a hesitant and very tentative bite, careful to avoid the syrup, and it tastes absolutely *incredible*. Which, if the orange juice hadn't been enough to make him suspicious, this *definitely* does. Phil might be a decent cook, but his stuff's never *this* good.

When he goes to take another, far less gentle bite, however, the plate fucking *shatters* under his fork. The fork *snaps* in his hand like he'd just taken one of Techno's weird laser metal cutter thingies to it. There's a dent in his bedside table. "Uh, Phil?" he calls, raising his voice just a bit and ignoring the way it makes his head feel absolutely pummeled. Phil slips back into his bedroom, medicine in hand, opening his mouth with the clear intention of saying something before immediately falling silent at the sight of Tommy's massacred breakfast. A nervous grin breaks across Tommy's face and he gestures to the plate. "Sorry...?"

Blinking, Phil sets the medicine down and clasps his hands together in front of the thin line his mouth has become, and Tommy hopes to

god that the remaining half of his fork isn't going to stick to his fingers like Phil's robe is. "Tommy," Phil starts in what's definitely a disgruntled mumble, yet sounds like his normal volume, then stops himself, rubbing at his temples. Tommy glances over at Henry's adorable, itty-bitty face and feels the robe come a bit loose in his apparently iron-grip. "How the *fuck* did you do that?"

"Phil, I'm going to be completely and one hundred percent honest with you," Tommy says, and to his dismay, the half-fork will not unstick from his index finger. The syrup still on the plate is oozing onto his bedside table now, and Tommy frowns. He hopes the smell of it doesn't linger; he'll go fucking crazy if he's forced to deal with that all damn day. Nevertheless, he looks back up at Phil and helplessly gestures-half-fork still in between two fingers-to the debris that remains of the former plate. "I've zero fuckin' idea, big man."

As he hands Tommy a few painkillers, Phil shakes his head and starts to carefully stack the plate pieces on top of one another. "You can take that with your juice, might taste a bit odd, though," he says, and Tommy hums, looking back over at Henry. It's worked the past two times, and it seems to work again, given that the fork slips out of his grasp. He grabs the glass *very gently*, careful to avoid touching his fingertips to it, and brings it closer to him. For a brief moment, he gets the fleeting feeling that something's about to go wrong, but he ignores it. He's in bed and having breakfast, and what could be worse than his shattered plate of pancakes? But as soon as he tightens his grip on the glass ever-so-slightly, it fucking *explodes*. Phil just stares. "Tommy. What-how did you-what the *fuck*, mate?"

Completely and utterly panicking, face and hair now drenched in orange juice-at least the smell of the citrus is stronger than the maple syrup now-Tommy gestures vaguely and sputters out a few incoherent syllables. Phil pinches the bridge of his nose, and Tommy smiles apologetically. "Sorry, Big P. Won't happen again," he says, though he's not entirely sure he can make that promise, given that he's broken an entire fucking place setting's worth of glassware just this morning.

Phil ruffles his hair and shrugs. "It's not a big deal, Toms, I'm just wondering how you've managed to trash your entire breakfast. My cooking isn't *that* bad," he huffs, and Tommy starts to say that no, he

actually quite enjoyed the food, he's just been accidentally incredibly strong this morning and has no idea why, but Phil waves him off. "I'm just messing with you. You need a shower, though, you've got juice everywhere. I'll change your sheets and clean up your table while you're in there, it's no problem."

"Thanks," Tommy manages, still utterly perplexed. He carefully shifts as much of the glass off of his lap as he can, then realizes that Phil's robe is still stuck to his other hand. Henry's really coming in clutch this morning, as it seems. Tommy shifts off the bed, Careful not to step on any stray glass, and heads over to the door, hesitating. "Uh, could you-are the lights off? In the hallway, I mean."

Glancing over his shoulder, Phil shrugs. "I don't think so, but you can text Techno and he'll probably turn them off for you," Phil tells him, turning back to the mess that Tommy's breakfast has become. "At least, I *think* he's home. I know he said he'd be going out later to grab a new welder's mask, but the shop doesn't open for a couple of hours."

Tommy digs into his pocket for his phone and is incredibly relieved to still find it alive and kicking, given that he'd passed out last night before he'd been able to plug it in. It's ridiculously low battery, but he's going to be home all damn day anyway. He opens up his messages with Techno and starts typing.

hey big man

mans gots a headache

can you turn the lights off in the hall

bitch

ur reading my fuckin gmessgaes

fuckign turn the lights off

fuck u bitch

tommy stop texting me, i'm literally turning them off right now.

oh my bad big man thx

He steps into the hall that's now dark enough that the light doesn't hurt his eyes, thankfully, and he nods at Techno, who looks him up and down and raises an eyebrow. Tommy raises his own right back—he's never been able to do the thing with just one, fucking Techno and his stupid niche skills—and crosses his arms. He is *well* aware that he's covered in orange juice, thank you very much. Techno, on the other hand, is a bitch and refuses to let him go without further questioning.

"How'd you manage that one?" Techno asks, monotone voice ringing in Tommy's ears, and Tommy winces, shoulders hunching up. Techno's face softens a minuscule amount and he lowers his volume, which Tommy will pointedly refuse to admit he appreciates greatly. "That bad, huh?"

Tommy nods. "Fuckin' keeping me home sick n' shit, man, this sucks," he grumbles, and Techno hums. It's his version of a sympathetic gesture. "Anyways, tell Phil he needs to get rid of the fucking maple syrup, man, that shit's stinking up the goddamned house, gotta be expired or something. And Wil's left the candle in the backyard on again—what a dumbass, honestly, how does he *always* forget—tell him he's a bitch and I can smell it from my room."

Blinking vacantly, Techno lifts a hand slowly towards the light switch. Tommy glances back and forth between Techno and the switch, brows furrowed, and Techno flicks it on, eyes widening as if he's genuinely surprised when Tommy curls into himself and starts swearing up a storm, covering his face with his hands and stumbling back.

"Ah," Techno says wisely, turning the lights back off and nodding, "you're a vampire."

Tommy bursts out laughing, ignoring the way it makes his headache pulse with a wave of pain. "Fucking *what?!*" he cackles, and Phil comes out into the hallway, broken breakfast in hand. "Phil, you're not gonna fuckin' believe this shit, it's so fuckin' *stupid*, Techno tell him what you just-go on, Tech, say it again with a straight face."

Techno blinks again and turns to Phil, no visible expression of emotion on his face. "Tommy's a vampire now, Phil, he's got enhanced senses," he says easily, and Phil stifles a snort. This just spurs Techno on, and he gestures to the shattered pile of the ceramic, metal, and glass in Phil's hands. "Clearly a case of vampire strength. We should put him outside and watch him turn to dust in the sun. It'd be funny."

"We're not putting Tommy outside, Tech, he's not a dog," Phil says, shifting to balance the pile in one hand as he reaches up to pat Tommy's head fondly. "No matter how feral he acts, he's unfortunately still a person, vampire or not."

Sputtering, Tommy whacks Phil's hand off his head with the back of his own-still hyper-aware of the fact he's apparently got a case of sticky fingers-and scowls at both of them. "Fuck d'you mean '*unfortunately*,' Phil, you want me to be a fuckin' dog?!" he demands, and Techno chuckles quietly. Phil wheezes out a laugh, and Tommy's head throbs so bad he can't ignore it this time. "Fuck, shit, s'too loud again."

Techno tilts his head curiously, but Phil smacks his shoulder and turns to Tommy with a grossly soft look on his face. "That's alright, mate, we'll keep it down, go take your shower," he reassures him, giving Techno a pointed look. Techno just throws his hands up placatingly and turns on his heel to go back to his room. Phil fixes Tommy with a worried look. "Maybe we should get you to a doctor sooner rather than later."

"No, no, I'm-! Ugh, Christ, Phil, it's fine, let it go," he mumbles, shouldering his way into the bathroom and pointedly refusing to turn the lights on. Tommy's not a fan of showering in the dark-he's pretty sure nobody is, and if they are, they must *actually* be a vampire. But anything's better than the constant piercing pain in his head that the lights have been causing.

Tommy glances at the mirror, surprised to see that there's no actual indication that he's sick. He's not pale, there's no sheen of cold sweat across his forehead, the bags under his eyes no worse than usual. His eyes, on the other hand, are bright, even in the dim room. Like, brighter than usual. It's odd. Nevertheless, there's orange juice

all over his face and it's making his hair all fructose-y, so Tommy hops in the shower and scrubs the citrus and maple syrup smell off of him, trying his hardest to ignore the way all the different products in the shower are just as overpowering.

When he gets back to his room, Phil's finishing up changing the last bit of the sheets. "Hey, bud, it's all clean. Wiped your table down and everything," Phil says, straightening up and dusting off his patterned pyjama pants. It's the pair with a bunch of lions all over it. Tommy nods his thanks and Phil claps a hand on his shoulder. The lemony scent of the cleaning products hangs in the air. "Get your ass back in bed, Toms, you're still sick."

"Yeah, yeah, alright old man. I'm already feeling better," Tommy huffs, but Phil just crosses his arms and fixes him with an expectant glare. Tommy gets his ass back in bed. There's a knock on the door, and Phil firmly makes Tommy settle back down while he goes to open it. Techno's standing in the doorway with a wooden stake. Tommy groans and rolls his eyes. "Fucks sakes, man, I'm not a fuckin' vampire!"

Techno waves the wooden stake in his direction threateningly. "I'll believe it when you expose yourself to sunlight, *demon*," he says, still monotone, and Phil shakes his head fondly. Tommy glares at him, then reaches over to move the curtains aside and open up the window. He sticks his hand outside and Techno nods, pocketing the stake. "I'll allow it."

Phil tuts and walks back over, smacking Tommy's hand back towards him and shutting the window again. "The two of you are gonna make me go grey," he grumbles, and Tommy opens his mouth to say that Phil's *well* on his way, but Phil playfully glares at him and waves a finger in his face. "Shut."

Pouting, Tommy crosses his arms. "Fine, but the both of you have to get out, I've got big man shit to do," he says, and Techno snorts. Tommy flips him off. Phil gives him an understanding smile and shoos Techno out, closing the door as quietly as he can behind the two of them. Tommy looks down at his hands and narrows his eyes. "Now what exactly the *fuck* is going on with you fuckers...?"

His fingertips don't stick together when he presses them against each other, but he *does* end up with his hands sticking to the wall and finds himself basking in Henry's ever-calming presence once again to unstick them. It has *got* to be the strangest experience of Tommy's life. He wonders if he can make his hands stick to *anything*. Tommy's not going to try the wall again, though, not until he's got better control of whatever's going on with his hands. After the plate and the glass, he's a bit afraid that if he tugs too hard to get them off, he'll rip chunks out of the house.

A closer inspection of his hands reveals that Tommy's fingerprints are different-the grooves are a bit deeper and shaped in a more uniform pattern. There are also tiny black marks on his wrists. Maybe not marks, but Tommy thinks he's going to vomit if he assumes that there are actual *holes in his body* that had definitely not been there last night, so he's just going to call them marks. He folds his fingers against his palms, trying to see if they'll stick, and is immediately and incredibly alarmed when something almost too fast to see shoots out from the... mark... on his wrist.

Tommy looks up at the ceiling slowly, abject horror written blatantly across his face. On the off-white paint is a bright white spider web, about the size of Tommy's entire fucking torso. Shaking slightly, Tommy looks back down at the mark on his wrist and swallows a bit of bile as he realizes the skin around it is slightly red and raised. That fucking *web* just came *out* of his *body*.

Which means...

A grin spreads across his face.

Tommy's got fucking *superpowers* now.

after the bite

Chapter 2: after the bite

Tommy explores his newly-acquired powers, SBI shenanigans ensue, and Tubbo forgets the word for pepperoni.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

He's got to be careful about this. Knowing Phil, he's not going to let Tommy do anything cool with his new powers-namely being a *literal* superhero-so Tommy *definitely* has to keep this on the down low. Plus, it's basically comic book superhero one-oh-one that telling any of your friends or family that you have a secret identity endangers them, and Tommy quite likes his friends and family, thanks, and would rather not have them die.

Well, he needs a secret identity in the first place in order to potentially endanger anyone, but Tommy's working on that. The first step, though, is *research*. He assumes that the spider bite from last night is the catalyst of his newfound powers, obviously, so Tommy starts trying to find as many spider facts as he can. As it turns out, other than webs, Tommy's also likely gained an increased field of vision-some spiders can apparently see completely around them, which would have been cool, but Tommy's peripheral field of view is still noticeably increased. Shame, it would have been really funny if he could legitimately say he has eyes in the back of his head.

And, of course, there's the issue of his brand new super strength. Given that apparently the average spider can lift about a hundred and seventy times their body weight, it's no wonder that Tommy had accidentally destroyed his breakfast this morning. He's definitely going to have to learn how to reign it in eventually, but for now, he's

still so hyped up about the fact that he has actual fucking superpowers that he's not exactly focused on holding himself back.

It also makes sense that his senses are all heightened now; at least he's got an explanation for why he can smell and hear things from far away and why the fluorescent lights in the house have been giving him such a headache. Plus, there's that weird sense he's been getting, like right now-for some reason, in the back of his mind he just *knows* someone's about to open the door, and sure enough, Wilbur comes barreling in like he owns the place.

He settles himself down easily on Tommy's desk chair and spins around, seemingly ignoring the multitude of middle fingers pointed in his direction. "Just got back from work, Tubbo told me to give you these," Wilbur says, plopping down a pile of papers onto Tommy's poor, clean desk. He puts his chin in his hand, and Tommy's half-tempted to smack the beanie off of his head. "So... you're sick? Big man Tommy's sick? You know, Techno thinks-"

"That I'm a vampire? Yeah, I know, he's a right bitch, Wil," Tommy finishes for him, rolling his eyes. Wilbur shrugs and spins around in the chair again, and Tommy *actually* reaches over to snatch his beanie. A squawk of offense claws its way out of Wilbur's throat, and Tommy sticks his tongue out. "That's what you fuckin' get, prick, quit it. And stop talking so loud, mans got a headache."

Humming noncommittally, Wilbur leans back in the chair, his arms folded lazily behind his head. "I just hope you know that Techno's got, like, an *actual* vendetta against vampires. As in a, 'he may or may not come into your room and stab you' vendetta. He really hated the *Twilight* movies," Wilbur says-he's actually making an effort to keep his voice down, thankfully-and Tommy throws his beanie in his face, Wilbur cackling as he pulls it back on. "Anyways, Tubbo also told me to yell at you to check your phone, but-oh, hey, what're you looking at?"

"Nothing!" Tommy says, far too quickly and suspiciously, and Wilbur tugs the laptop towards him, squinting as he reads from the *Top Ten Most Powerful Spider Species* article that Tommy had forgotten to tab out of. Wilbur turns to Tommy with a questioning look, probably silently asking why he's being so weird about an article on spiders.

Thankfully, Tommy's panicked brain comes up with an explanation that does not involve his new superpowers. "It's for a biology project I'm working on-spiders n' shit, yeah? Like how the spiders-how they, like, fuck with the ecosystem if they're, uh, in the wrong one."

Wilbur looks relatively unconvinced, but he just shrugs. He perks up, as if he's remembered something, and Tommy blinks. "Oh! Right, Phil wanted me to ask if you were gonna eat anything if he orders a pizza," he says, snapping his fingers. A grin spreads across Wilbur's face, the mischievous kind, and Tommy immediately opens his mouth to protest whatever's about to come out of Wilbur's, only for a hand to be slapped unceremoniously on top of it. Wilbur raises his voice to a shout. "Dadza! Tommy says he doesn't want any pizza! He says we should just give it all to me and-oh, *fuck*, Tommy, are you alright?!"

Hands clasped over his ears, nails scratching at his scalp, Tommy can barely hear Wilbur over the incessant ringing noise bouncing around his skull. He shakes his head gingerly. At least Wilbur's let go of him now-the touch had made his skin feel like it had been burned. "Told you, mans got a headache," he mumbled, and Wilbur scans his face, eyes apologetic. "S'fine, Wil, you just can't shout, is all."

The door flies open, and Tommy winces at the light from the hallway, and Phil quickly closes it behind him, clearly getting the hint. "Is he alright?" Phil asks, the question directed towards Wilbur, who shrugs helplessly and scoots out of the way. Tommy lets his hands fall into his lap; they're shaking a little. "Hey, mate, we'll get you some water and some painkillers, yeah? He's sick, Wil, I told you that the *minute* that you got home."

He sounds irritated, even through the ringing. Wilbur makes a vague gesture at Tommy. "How was I supposed to know he has a migraine or some shit?" he hisses, clearly meant to be quiet, but Tommy's enhanced hearing makes it sound normal. Wilbur turns to him and glances at the door. "Toms, were the hall lights bothering you?"

"A little," Tommy admits begrudgingly. He's kind of sick of being stuck in his room unless he texts Techno to turn the lights off for him. Phil cards his fingers through Tommy's curls and turns the

brightness down on his laptop. That's... actually pretty helpful. "I mean, I'm not a fuckin' pussy, I'll survive if the lights are on, Wil, I mean seriously-"

"I think we should invest in daylight bulbs," Wilbur says to Phil, completely ignoring him, and Tommy kicks at his ankles. Bastard. "If Tommy's getting a migraine from the lights, it's probably the fluorescent bulbs bugging him."

Tommy laughs weakly. *Bugging* him. A shame he can't share the unintentional pun with them. Phil smiles gently at him, and Tommy can't find the energy to be mad about it. "Why don't I go out and grab those and pick pizza up on my way back instead of having it delivered?" he suggests, and Tommy flips Wilbur off again. Wilbur's clearly about to make an obscene gesture right back, but Phil affixes him with The Look, and Wilbur deflates. "Keep him company and get him what he needs while I'm gone, yeah?"

He ruffles Wilbur's hair on his way out, and the two of them are left alone in Tommy's room. Neither of them are happy with this predicament. Wilbur's phone buzzes, and he pulls it out, only to roll his eyes at whatever he's just gotten a notification for. "Are you going to text Tubbo or am I going to have to confiscate your pocket change to pay for my phone bill?" he asks flatly, unplugging Tommy's phone and practically throwing it at him. Tommy glares, but he looks at his messages anyway.

tommy are you suck

sick*

shit

the teacher just said ur out sick

is that what ur telling phil so he doesnt know u were messing around in the train staion again

TOMMY

rNboo is asking for u

you have his notes????

tommyyyyyyyyy

pick up ur phoneeeee

unless you lost it on the tracks

hello stranger with tommys phone

can u give it back to him i need to yell at him

fuckign prick pick up

ranboo brought fanta agin

im telling him that coke is better on ur behalf ur welcome

tommy

tommy!!

ur phone

i will march over to ur house and shove ur phone up ur nose

*i wanted to type something meaner but rnaboo told me to
change it bc it was "too rude tubbo"*

no u know what

im gonna text wilbur

wait

technoblade just sent me a message??? hello??

why is he saying ur a vampire

tommy i think technoblade unironiclay thinks ur a vampire

anyways im gonna yell at wilbur more now

Tommy rolls his eyes and starts typing.

jesus fuck tubbo chill out

you're so clingy

i am going to climb in from ur window now i hate u

just use the front door u freak

Tommy is promptly left on read. Understandable. He doesn't doubt that Tubbo's gonna follow up on it, either; it's a matter of when, not if. Wilbur raises a brow at him, and Tommy waves his phone. "You are now Tubbo-free," he declares, and Wilbur mock-bows to him. Tommy grins, all smug. "Yes, yes, I am the biggest and coolest man in the universe, and you are bowing before me because you are a pussy and I am the best."

Wilbur tackles him.

As Tommy is enjoying his perfectly lovely slice of pizza, he gets that sense again at the back of his mind, and he throws the window open, peering down to see Tubbo climbing toward his windowsill, knuckles halfway to a knock. "Oh, hello, Tommy," Tubbo says cheerfully, as if he is not currently about to fall into the bushes cradling the bottom trim of the house. "Could you help me up? I'd rather not fall and break my neck, thanks."

"You're such a fucking idiot," Tommy huffs, leaning out the window to reach for Tubbo's hand and-as gently as possible, because he *doesn't* want to accidentally rip Tubbo's arm out of its socket-haul him up into the room. Tubbo settles on the bed and dusts himself off, waving at Wilbur after a moment. Tommy shoves at Wilbur's shoulders, jerking his head toward the door. "Alright, get out, Wil, Big T and I have important big man shit to discuss, go on."

Wilbur rolls his eyes but leaves them alone anyway, and Tommy grins as the door closes, absolutely ready to spill both last night and this morning's events to Tubbo, but he hesitates. Tubbo would *definitely* be in danger if Tommy's going to use his superpowers to

help out the community. Honestly, no kidnapper would stand a chance against Techno or Phil, and Wilbur would probably be able to talk his way out of any potential kidnappings, cocky bastard that he is, but Tubbo... well, he wouldn't be *easy* to take hostage, he'd probably put up a hell of a fight, but it's so much easier to catch him alone and off-guard.

And Tommy can't tell his family, either, because Techno would simply tell him he's not allowed-and Tommy would listen, because Techno frightens him a little bit, not that he'd ever admit it-Phil would practically trap him in the house to keep him safe, and Wilbur would *definitely* snitch on him to Phil. So basically, Tommy's got no one he can tell about his superpowers if he's going to be using them, lest he put the lives of the people he's begrudgingly forced to care about in mortal peril. And he'd rather not put them in mortal peril, despite what one might think of him.

"I was in the tube line yesterday, saw a massive rat in one of the abandoned parts, had to book it home, turns out I've got a massive migraine. Probably too much rat piss in the air or something," Tommy settles on, and Tubbo nods easily. Tommy's shoulders sag a little with relief, and he's glad at least *one* person would back up his cover story should he need it. "Anyways, what's happening at sch-hey! Put him down, you bitch!"

Tubbo freezes up, Henry in hand, and sets him back down in front of Tommy, arms raised in front of his chest in mock-surrender. "Christ, Tommy, alright. Didn't know you don't want me touching Henry," he says, making sure to keep his voice quieter than normal, and Tommy almost feels bad about it, but Henry is currently his only way of being calm enough to unstick. His lone solace in this sticky-fingered world. He can't risk Henry getting lost.

"Sorry, man, I'm just... he brings me comfort-very manly comfort, fuck you, stop laughing!-and I don't want anything to happen to him, s'all," Tommy grumbles, and Tubbo hums, grabbing the little stress ball off of Tommy's desk and tossing that around instead. Tommy glances over at his laptop and picks his pizza back up, taking a massive bite. "Tubbo, f'you had a superpower, like a really cool one, w'd'you use it to fight crimes n' shit?"

Frowning thoughtfully, Tubbo lays flat on his back and tosses the stress ball up again. It lands square on his nose. Tommy snickers. "Dunno. It'd be cool, sure, but I don't think I could dodge, like, *guns* without super speed or something," Tubbo says, still quiet enough that Tommy can actually handle having a conversation without his migraine coming back, and Tommy makes a mental note to check to see if he's got super speed whenever Phil stops fussing over him long enough to let him out of the house. If nothing else, he's always got The Sense to fall back on. "Why d'you ask?"

Tubbo's question snaps Tommy out of his stupor, and Tommy just shrugs, trying his hardest not to look like someone who definitely has superpowers deciding what to use them for. "Biology project," he says, regurgitating the same excuse he'd used with Wilbur and thanking every religion's god he can remember that biology is the only class he doesn't share with Tubbo. "I'm supposed to look up fuckin' insects or something, found out they've got fucking *crazy* strength. Tiny little pricks can carry like a hundred times their own body weight, it's batshit."

Eyes widening, Tubbo shoves him. "No way. No way, Tommy, that's so weird, it's almost like *nobody* asked," he says, delivering the last bit in a completely flat voice, and Tommy shoves him off the bed. He wolfs down the rest of his pizza. "Listen, I like the hypothetical, right, I just don't give a fuck about any bugs *other* than bees. Bees aren't hairy or have a bajillion legs, and they're the only kind of insect that matters anyway. They're important for the environment, y'know."

"Um, excuse you, bitch, spiders are *incredibly* cool and important," Tommy scoffs. Perhaps now this is a deep-seated need to defend his brethren. He is one of them now. No. That's weird. He is decidedly *not* a spider. He is a man. Truly the biggest of men. Well, he's not *entirely* a man either now, he supposes. He's becoming more and more of a tentative half-and-half situation, to be exact.

"Spiders aren't *insects*, you moron," Tubbo tells him, and Tommy whacks him with a pillow. Tubbo snatches a stray piece of pepperoni from Tommy's plate. Tommy can still smell the cheese it had been touching before he'd finished the slice. And holy *fuck*, that pizza had tasted way better than normal. Tommy's thanking his lucky goddamned stars for his enhanced sense of taste right about now.

"You're staring at me like I've just eaten your last meal, and *all* I took was, like, half a fucking, uh... meat circle, dude."

Tommy bursts out in a wild cackle, hands clutching at his sides and head pulsing a little bit with the volume of it. "*Meat circle-!* Tubbo fuck's sakes, I-! Hah!" he wheezes, and Tubbo gets all huffy, whining about forgetting the word for it. "It's a fucking *pepperoni*, Tubbo, how the *fuck* did you forget the word for *pepperoni*?!"

"You're acting like you didn't forget the word for muffler last fucking Friday! 'Gun silencer but car'-I think meat circle is better than that," Tubbo argues, and Tommy starts to sputter something about how no, the two are not *remotely* compatible, but the volume of their conversation is catching up to him, and he winces a little bit. Tubbo's speaking much quieter now. "Oh, fuck, are you-? Is it your rat piss migraine?"

Tommy stifles a laugh and nods. Tubbo's clearly suppressing his own laughter, so Tommy stares pointedly at Henry. What a calming aura that little cow has. "My bad, should've warned you the rat piss migraine comes with volume control issues," Tommy says, grinning, and Tubbo shrugs.

"I mean, *you* come with volume control issues, I don't know why you're surprised it'd carry over into your migraines," Tubbo tells him, and Tommy has half a mind to smack him with a pillow again, but mercifully decides to let Tubbo live. For now. "Honestly, Tommy, sucks that you got sick. You missed out on Purpled absolutely destroying Ranboo in tic-tac-toe."

"Tic-tac-toe?"

"It was in maths. We were *really* bored."

"Fair enough."

Tommy finds himself getting used to his enhanced senses with time. Phil had kept him home for the following day, since Tommy's migraine hadn't *completely* gone away, and now Tommy can survive

with all the lights on! He doesn't even get a headache from chatting at normal volume now, and *his* normal volume definitely requires a higher tolerance. He still jumps when Wilbur drops something in the living room or if Techno sharpens a knife in his workshop just a *little* too loudly, no matter where Tommy is in the house, but it's still progress.

He also finds himself having to pretend as though he's surprised by things now. The Sense often lets Tommy have either a general sense that *something's* about to happen, or if he's particularly tuned in to his surroundings, The Sense lets him have a vague understanding of just what *is* about to happen. It's quite useful, especially when Wilbur tries to pop out from behind his closet door to scare him, only to be met with a very impassive expression on Tommy's face.

The smell of things has also dampened down a tad, but Tommy still cannot be in the vicinity of *anything* with a sweet smell. Catching a whiff of something just a little *too* sugary feels like acid filling his nose, and it's quite ruining his favorite desserts. He can't even eat most things with too much sugar in them anymore, because that'll be *all* he can taste. Phil's been eyeing Tommy suspiciously every time he turns down ice cream or cookies after a meal. He has, however, found himself legitimately drooling at the smell of any kind of meat, which he absolutely blames on his spider instincts and will definitely not help him convince Techno that he is *not*, in fact, a vampire. Not to mention his ridiculously increased metabolism-he's been eating almost non-stop.

He'd also tested out the super speed thing when Wilbur and Techno had both been out and Phil had been at his office, but alas, Tommy is fairly certain he doesn't possess sonic speed. A shame, really, but his new reflexes more than make up for it. He can literally catch *anything* before it hits the ground now. Or if something's flying in his direction, he can snatch it out of the air without even looking. Tommy thanks that poor house fly for its sacrifice, but this is important data that's being collected here. That fly had been crushed for the greater good. Definitely not because it had been annoying the shit out of Tommy while he'd been doing make-up work.

Speaking of his make-up work, he'd snapped about six pencils in half while doing it, completely unintentionally. He's really gotta work on getting his super strength in check before he goes back to school, lest he fucking decimate a desk. Plus, he'll have to be constantly holding himself back anyways if he's going to use his powers; it won't exactly make him look good if he accidentally murders every wrong'un he comes across. Nor would it adhere to Tommy's very strict and definitely inflexible moral code. He has *standards*, you see. It wouldn't do Tommy any good to go around destroying everything in the house, either, so controlling his super strength-reigning it back-is his current number one priority.

The next thing on his list is that if he is, in fact, going to be the biggest man of all time and fight crime and help out the community, Tommy's going to need a very epic and convincing disguise to keep his very real secret identity just that-a *secret*. So Tommy is going to make himself a supersuit. And *no*, it's not going to be a lame costume from the party store a few blocks away, Tommy had ripped through the fabric the minute he'd managed to pull on his Halloween costume from last year and throw a singular punch. That thing had practically evaporated. He'll have to find a fabric that can handle all of his awesome and cool superpowers, which might be hard, but if he dampens down the strength a little, it shouldn't be *too* hard.

Tommy's going to have to figure out how to most efficiently use his webs as well. They work just fine for sticking things to the wall-he'd had to take *so many things* down from the ceiling, including poor Henry, once he'd figured out that he could direct his webs *at* things and trap them-but given Tommy's research on spider silk, the webs *should* be able to hold his body weight no problem, and he's fairly certain that with a little more air pressure and a little more work on making the web fluid flow for longer periods of time, he could feasibly use them for transportation around the city. Hopefully whatever infrastructure departments run the city won't mind a few webs here and there.

This leaves things here, with Tommy testing out his heightened agility. He's been having an absolute fucking blast testing out all of his new powers, don't get him wrong, but he's particularly excited about these ones. He can jump higher than he used to be able to,

and he figures that if he pairs that with his sticky fingers-and feet, as he'd learned after a very perplexing encounter with the bath mat-then Tommy could *very likely* climb walls. Like an actual fucking spider. Which would be another thing to add to Tommy's incredible list of *Big Man's Spider Attributes*.

He's willing his fingers to work properly as he readies himself to jump, arms pumping by his sides. He's got this. *He's got this*. Tommy is definitely not afraid of falling on his head and potentially paralyzing himself, not at all. Taking a deep breath, he jumps, twisting himself in mid-air so that his fingertips attach to the ceiling. His feet follow, and he's literally crouching on the ceiling. *Tommy is upside-down*. He lets out a celebratory whoop, then abruptly falls quiet. He can hear footsteps coming up the stairs, and The Sense is screaming at him to get down, that whoever's coming up the stairs-Phil, it would seem from the sound of quiet cursing as he stubs his toe-is going to come into his room.

But Tommy *can't* get down. He's stuck, and his hands won't come off. It's probably because he's panicking, he knows that, but Phil's about to come into his room and see Tommy on the ceiling, like some feral raccoon demon, and then he *definitely* won't let Tommy become an epic crime fighting super-spider. This fucking sucks! He's figured out he can climb walls and hang upside down, but at what cost? The knob turns, and The Sense churns the pit of dread that's settled in his gut. Tommy crawls, still upside-down, to the corner of the room and presses himself flat against it, hardly daring to breathe as the door opens.

"Toms, I brought you lun-Tommy?" Phil asks, confused, glancing around the room, but never up, which instantly fills Tommy with relief. Why would Phil be looking up to search for him anyway? No other human being would be found on their ceiling, so Tommy really has nothing to worry about. Phil frowns and starts setting down the plate as Tommy silently crawls his way to the doorframe. *Henry, Henry, Henry, think of Henry*. "Wil? Have you seen Tommy? Is he downstairs?"

"No!" Wilbur's voice calls from the living room, and Tommy crouches upside down in the doorframe, thankfully unsticking his hands and now standing upright-or, still upside down, but upright upside down-

in the doorway. Wilbur's footsteps start to get closer, and Tommy panics, stretching his hands out to be flat on the ground and praying that he's tall enough to make this shit somewhat believable. Wilbur's footsteps behind him halt, and Tommy squeezes his eyes shut. "Wh-Tommy, what the fuck are you doing?!"

Phil turns around just then, and Tommy grins shakily at him. Phil blinks. "I'm also very interested in your answer to that question," he says, a weak sense of laughter underlying his words. Tommy makes a face at him and tries to crane his neck to see Henry and hopefully unstick, but Phil's in the way. "Y'know, mate, if this is your way of asking me for gymnastics lessons, there are much less weird ways to ask."

"I don't want fuckin' gymnastics lessons," Tommy huffs, cheeks puffed out. He hasn't gotten a headrush yet, which is a little miracle in and of itself. Wilbur pokes at his sides, and Tommy squirms, but doesn't let himself waver too badly. "Fuck off, man, you're such a prick. Go away, Wil. Phil, Philza, crow father, come collect Wilbur. He's a bitch and I hate him, Phil."

"You don't hate him," Phil says, rolling his eyes, "but if you need help getting down, just say so, Tommy."

Miraculously, Tommy catches a proper glimpse of Henry and focuses on his little button eyes, and feels himself relax enough to let his legs down. He purposefully angles himself so that both of his legs smack Wilbur square in the chest, and Wilbur catches him with an *oof*, glaring down at Tommy. "Hello, bitch," Tommy says with a grin, and The Sense gives him about two seconds of warning before Wilbur abruptly drops his legs. Tommy lets him, only because it'd look weird if he had been prepared for that. He definitely doesn't want to entertain Wilbur's antics and make him laugh, no sir.

Sighing as he looks down at Tommy, Wilbur shakes his head. Phil stifles a laugh. "I can't wait for you to have other people to bother tomorrow," Wilbur says wistfully, and Phil practically cackles, the absolute traitor. Tommy smacks his ankle. Wilbur pokes at him with his foot. "Demon child. Gremlin boy. Absolutely feral little lad."

"He needs his rabies shot," Phil agrees, and Tommy erupts into an

onslaught of swears.

This house is a fucking nightmare.

His powers have been tested and Tommy has been instilled with a false sense of confidence. Whatever could go wrong?

back to school

Chapter 3: back to school

The first day back at school after Tommy's gotten his powers. What could possibly go wrong?

CW for a brief panic attack at the beginning of the chapter!!!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Tommy had severely underestimated just how loud a school hallway can be. Granted, his walk to school with Tubbo and Ranboo had been loud as well, the volume paired with daylight just bearable enough that he could get through it without a headache, but this is another level of loud. Tommy can hear *every fucking conversation* that's happening, and he can faintly hear Wilbur's voice somewhere by his English classroom one hallway over. Tommy scowls; he shouldn't have to hear Wilbur droning on until a bit before lunch, and yet his stupid senses have decided that he needs to hear *everything* right now. It fucking *sucks*.

His hands are shaking and his head is pounding, and Tommy fucking despises the overhead lights as well-it's all going wrong so soon, these fucking superpowers are a curse. How's he supposed to function like a normal fucking person at school if he can't even get through the damn hallway?! There's a hand on his arm, probably Tubbo getting ready to drag him to their first class of the day, and Tommy flinches violently, the touch on top of everything else quickly overwhelming him.

Ranboo's by Tubbo's side, brows knit together, and Tommy makes a face, shrugging away from Tubbo's hand and wincing as the first bell goes off. *Fuck*. It's much worse than he'd thought it'd be, all shrill and screechy, and Tubbo's looking at Tommy like he's crazy-or maybe he's just concerned, but Tommy's not exactly in the mood to entertain either option right now. He stumbles a bit, jostled by passing peers and the sensations are all *too much* and now he's going to fucking hyperventilate.

Then, Ranboo's standing in front of him, adjusting his mask, and Tommy is begrudgingly quite thankful that his freakishly tall friend can block the light somewhat efficiently. "Can I touch you?" Ranboo asks, keeping his voice quiet but clear, which only adds to the pounding of Tommy's headache, but he nods anyway. Ranboo carefully guides Tommy over towards the bathrooms, one hand on his bicep and one between his shoulders, gesturing for Tubbo to follow them. "Let's get you somewhere not so crowded, is-that's okay, right?"

"Y-Yeah, whatever," Tommy mumbles, the ringing in his ears spiking as some guy's shriek of a laugh sounds out from nearby. Ranboo holds the door open for him, and Tommy starts to say thanks, but his throat and head feel like they're filled with cotton and he's not quite certain he can breathe again. "Fuck, I'm-shit, sorry, I-I don't know what's... fuck, what is *wrong* with me, man, I'm-!"

"Nothing is wrong with you," Ranboo says slowly, still keeping his voice down, and Tubbo glances between them nervously, clearly unsure of what to do here. A hand leaves Tommy's arm and hovers over his chest, and he vaguely registers that it belongs to Ranboo. His vision is spotty now, so this is truly a feat. "Is it alright if I-I Tommy, can you breathe with me? In and out, deep breaths, you're gonna pass out, man."

The hand hovering over him settles on his chest, but it's not stinging like it had out in the hall, and Tubbo's moved to block the door and shut off the lights, and Tommy can fucking *breathe* again, finally. "Sorry, I'm sorry," Tommy stutters out, eyes darting over what he can see of Ranboo's face as he attempts and fails to follow his lead and take deep breaths. "The hallway-I don't know, I-I just fuckin'-it was *so much*, Ranboo, I couldn't-my brain felt like it was gonna

explode-!"

"It's okay, you're okay," Ranboo says gently, and Tommy's fingers flex at his sides, The Sense telling him someone's about to knock on the door, and sure enough, there's a quiet knock not a moment later. Idly, Tommy notes that Ranboo's face looks funny when he's annoyed. "Tubbo, tell whoever it is that we're busy."

"We're busy!" Tubbo says, too loud, and Tommy lets out a definitely very manly whimper, thank you very much. Wincing, Tubbo sends him an apologetic look as whoever's outside knocks, a little louder this time. This fucking *sucks*. Tommy can't even follow Ranboo's breathing counts properly, he doesn't know what the fuck is going on in his brain, and it feels like his chest is going to cave in and he'll die and- "Oh, uh... come on in, Mr. Soot!"

Tommy whips his head up and his eyes go wide as Wilbur comically squeezes himself into the bathroom from the tiny gap Tubbo has allowed the door to open up. "Niki told me she saw you guys rush into the bathroom, you've got about two minutes until class starts, so what's-oh, *fuck*, Tommy, are you alright?" he asks, eyes just as wide as Tommy's, and Ranboo shrinks back a bit as Wilbur looks to him for an answer.

"Sorry, Mr. Soot, we were headed to class, we *swear*, but I think Tommy started having a panic attack, so I figured it'd be best to get him out of the hallway, 'cuz that's kinda-it seemed like it was the reason he was having one, and I'm trying to get him to take deep breaths, I just-we'll get to class on time, don't worry," Ranboo prattles on, and Tommy almost smacks him for being so loud, but he doesn't. And definitely not because he feels like his arms are lead, it's because he's being merciful today.

Wilbur pinches the bridge of his nose, and Tommy hysterically thinks he looks just like Phil when he does it. "Christ, Ranboo, that's not what I... listen, making sure you lot are getting to class on time is the least of my concerns right now," Wilbur says, and he looks really worried. "Okay, Tommy, you're here, you're safe, just breathe, buddy."

"Fuck," Tommy says, and he sounds gutted, even to himself. Tubbo

hovers around his shoulder, still looking ridiculously worried. Tommy tries to steady his breathing, really, he does, but Ranboo's starting to seem a little panicked now, and his breathing continues to hitch. "Wil, Wilbur, I'm-Ranboo, Tubbo, go to class, I'll be fine, i-it's fine."

"You're clearly *not* fine, big man," Tubbo says, and Tommy scowls at him. He's still struggling to breathe properly, though, so maybe Tubbo has a point. "And, really, we'll stay with you 'til you're okay, Tommy, it's not like we're going to different classes."

Wilbur shakes his head. "No, the two of you should really get to class, I'll take care of this," he says, and Ranboo and Tubbo exchange a look before hesitantly nodding and slipping out of the bathroom. Wilbur turns back to him, now much less composed. "Toms, what's wrong? Was it-did your migraine come back?"

Relieved at the easy out, Tommy nods and slumps back against the nearest wall, the relative quiet of the bathroom and the lack of sensation finally letting his breathing calm. "Fuck, Wil, I'm cutting into your class time," Tommy says, voice a little hoarse, and Wilbur waves dismissively.

"Don't worry about that, you moron," he tells Tommy fondly, brows still furrowed. Tommy's heart stops hammering in his chest-still drums on a little faster than it should, but it's not overwhelming anymore-and he can breathe. "Was it the lights? The students? Do you want me to call Phil to take you home?"

"No!" Tommy nearly shouts. Wilbur stares at him, and Tommy feels his face flush in embarrassment. Wilbur's hands hover over Tommy's arms; it's clear he doesn't really know how to go about fixing this. "I-no, Wilbur, I'm fine, it was just... I had a moment, I'm *fine*, please just let me get to class."

If he can't handle a school hallway, how the fuck is he meant to use his superpowers to fight crime? Wilbur gives him a wary look, but his hands return to his sides. He straightens out his dorky-ass cardigan-really, even *Tommy* has a better sense of fashion than that-and pushes his glasses up his nose. "Right, well, come back with me to my classroom, I'll write you a note and you'll be able to get to class without a late penalty," Wilbur says, opening the door back up. The

hallway is mostly emptied now, thankfully, but Tommy's shoulders still hunch up by his ears as he follows Wilbur down the way. It's embarrassing enough that he's gone and had a panic attack, apparently, but now he's got to follow his fucking *brother* so he gets an excuse? "Tommy, I can *hear* the gears in your brain overthinking. Chill out."

Grumbling a few curses under his breath, Tommy steps on the back of Wilbur's shoe and snickers as he stumbles a little bit. "Oops," he says, eyes wide in feigned innocence as Wilbur turns around to glare at him. Shaking his head, Wilbur turns back around, and they walk for a bit longer until room 802 is in front of them. "I'll stay out here, Wil, go ahead and-"

"It's 'Mr. Soot' when we're in my classroom, and no, you get your ass in here, I'm not making Niki keep an eye out for my class from across the hall for longer than necessary," Wilbur huffs, and Tommy wants to smack him because he's being incredibly annoying. This is what's *really* unnecessary, honestly, it is. Wilbur ushers Tommy inside, and he awkwardly stands by the door as Wilbur digs around for a slip of paper and addresses his class. "Sorry, just another moment! I know you're all totally dying to listen to me talk for an hour and a half, trust me."

The class chuckles, and most of them look at Tommy, who scowls at the sudden attention. "Thanks, bitch," he says as Wilbur hands him the excuse slip, and Wilbur crosses his arms. Tommy rolls his eyes, but Wilbur doesn't falter. "Thank you, *Mr. Soot*. Christ, can I go now? You're so annoying."

"Please, for the love of God and all things holy, do not make me explain to Phil why I've been forced to give you detention, and get out of here before I am *required to do so*, Thomas," Wilbur says, and Tommy stifles a laugh. Wilbur nudges him to the door and then stands in front of the white board, clapping his hands together and grinning. "Right! So, capitalism, as we have picked up on throughout the text, is *not* good."

Tommy doesn't hear the rest of whatever Wilbur's point is, because he's already down the hall and out of range-even with his enhanced senses-by the time Wilbur starts discussing whether or not ethical

consumption is at all possible. He's already dreading getting to his first class, but it's not like he's got a choice. Phil would *definitely* need some kind of explanation if Tommy attempts to skip, and he's not about to risk missing Wilbur's class after all this.

As soon as he steps into his class, all eyes are on him, and Tommy sheepishly hands over the late slip to his teacher, a really nice guy who lets his students call him Sam. "Nice of you to join us, Tommy," Sam says, a playful glint in his eyes, and a few students laugh quietly as Tommy makes his way to the back, sitting in his usual seat between Tubbo and Ranboo. "As I was saying, since we don't have the computer lab today, I'll be splitting you up into pairs to start your research for your next project."

As Sam starts to do just that, pairing people with whoever they're sitting next to, Tubbo leans towards Tommy, both of them still facing front. "So," Tubbo starts, voice barely above a whisper, "you still having a bit of a time or are you good now? 'Cuz I'm gonna be honest here, bossman, your head's gotta be in the game for this project. This shit sounds super complicated, we've got to build a thing using the programming language we've been learning. Or something like that, I was only kind of paying attention."

"I'm fine, Tubbo," Tommy huffs, and Tubbo tilts his head a little, like he doesn't really believe him. "I am! I *am*, Big T. Had a moment, got over it, Wil's a bitch as always, but it's fine now. Also, why the fuck are we *bullding* something, we're in a fucking computer class, this is bullshit. Maybe Sam should build himself a wife, might take up enough of his time that he'll give us less shit to sort through."

Tubbo snickers, but the two of them quickly straighten up as Sam gets to their row. He might be one of the nicer teachers here, but he's still nicknamed The Warden for a reason. "Right, Ranboo, you're with Tommy, and Tubbo, you're with Purpled. Any questions?" Sam asks, glancing around, but no one seems to have any. He smiles and turns to Purpled, who quirks a brow. "Purpled, do you mind helping me pass around the rubric and project specifications?"

Purpled shrugs and hands the first couple of papers to Tubbo, who passes it to Tommy, who pointedly refuses to pass the last one to

Ranboo, because Ranboo is a bitch, and Tommy should be the one in charge of the project anyway. "I am literally begging you to let this be a normal project and cooperate with me here," Ranboo says in a long-suffering tone, which is quite rude, actually, because Tommy's only been making him suffer since this morning.

Ranboo stares at him flatly and holds his hand out for the paper. Tommy hands it over without protest-aside from a scowl, but he's definitely allowed that because the lights in the room are really bright, and he's losing the will to banter. Ranboo seems to notice and gets this weirdly concerned look on his face, so Tommy flips him off. He doesn't need Ranboo's pity, and he certainly doesn't need anyone sussing out his superpowers *this* early in the game, so Tommy glues his eyes to the paper and clears his throat pointedly.

"Right, big man, what're we doing, then?"

Wilbur's class is more of a nightmare for Tommy than it usually is, and that's saying something. Firstly, he *did* do the assigned reading, thank you very much, he's just had quite a bit on his mind since the whole spider superpowers situation had started. Which is quite understandable, but alas, given that Tommy cannot tell anyone about it, he can't use his one good excuse. And while Wilbur has hardly ever accepted any of Tommy's excuses, he thinks it's fair to assume that this one's a bit of an exception to the rule.

Superpowers notwithstanding, The Sense is getting very well-acquainted with Wilbur's antics, given that it's predicted every time Wilbur's called on him to give an answer that Tommy does not have. It's a bit funny, given that The Sense is sort of forcing his brain to interpret the threat of being called on as danger, but Tommy's not exactly in a joking mood right now. He hasn't been since the walk to school this morning, as a matter of fact.

"Now, this doesn't have just one concrete answer, but I'd appreciate it if you supported your answer with something that's actually in the book, guys. Why do *you* think Javier's so hellbent on catching Jean Valjean?" Wilbur asks, pointing up at his stupid flowchart of all the relationships the characters in the book have to one another.

Tommy hates that stupid chart. He hates the stupid book, too, but he hates the chart even more. Wilbur looks over the hands that are *actually* up and zeroes in. "Thomas! You haven't spoken in a while, highly unusual for you."

Tommy glares at him before turning his glare down at the open book in front of him. None of the words are registering. On his left, someone stifles a laugh. It's quiet enough that he wouldn't have heard it with normal hearing, sadly-he'd have loved to start yelling at someone, if not just to get his frustration out. He's got to answer eventually, and all of these eyes are on him, and The Sense is definitely not happy with this situation, and neither is Tommy, but they're in it together now.

Affixing Wilbur with a flat stare, Tommy leans back in his seat. "Mans got a crush?" he guesses, and Wilbur furrows his brows, but he hasn't outright said Tommy's wrong yet, so Tommy's motor mouth starts to run a mile a minute. "I mean, seriously, the guy's, like, *obsessed* with him. In a deranged weirdo kind of way, but still."

He's only going off of what little he remembers from the movie, which Wilbur had made him watch because Tommy, quote: 'probably won't pay attention in my damn class.' But evidently, Wilbur's shoulders sag in a defeated kind of way. "That *is* one way to interpret the text," he concedes, and Tommy blinks. He hadn't thought that would actually work. Wilbur holds up a single finger. "But! You'd need much more evidence from the text to support that thesis in an essay, so can anyone else provide an example that would help prove this theory to be true?"

A surprising number of hands goes up, and Tommy grins. Take *that*, Wilbur. Now he doesn't have to worry about being picked to answer again, at least not for a while. Tubbo leans towards Tommy and slips him a folded up piece of paper. He shoots Tubbo a wary look and gets a flat glare in return, so Tommy holds his hands up slightly above the desk in surrender. Opening up the note, a single sentence is scrawled out in Tubbo's messy handwriting, which definitely constitutes an absolute waste of paper.

Ranboo wants to know if he can go to yours after school!!!

Scowling, Tommy glances over at Ranboo, who waves minutely, looking rather nervous. He taps his pencil against his hand and scans his eyes over Tubbo's writing again. It's not like Ranboo hasn't been over before, but Tommy had been planning to try out some fabrics for his potential supersuit tonight, and this kind of puts a damper on his plans. Alas, he *does* possess a conscience and doesn't want to leave Ranboo high and dry in a pair project.

Tell Ranboo he's a bitch and yes he can.

He passes the note back to Tubbo, but unfortunately, Wilbur's looking in their exact direction at that moment, and Tommy winces as he sighs. "You lot are going to get separated again if you don't stop passing notes," he warns, arms crossed. Wilbur turns back towards the board, and Tommy tunes him out again as he starts explaining something-it's probably something Tommy should be paying attention to, but honestly, he couldn't care less. The bell sounds off for lunch, and as Tommy starts collecting his things, Wilbur waves. "Thomas, stay back for a minute, I need to talk to you."

Rolling his eyes, Tommy shrugs at Ranboo and Tubbo and heads to the front of the room, completely unamused. "Listen, man, I've got to get to lunch, Ranboo's got good shit today and if I'm not there to steal it, he'll eat it before I can," he huffs, and Wilbur raises a brow. Tommy's starting to get sick of this; first Wilbur had been singling him out during class, and now pulling him aside and taking time out of his precious lunch? "Wil, I'm gonna be honest with you, I'm having a shit day, and you're not exactly helping."

"And if *I'm* being honest," Wilbur starts, clearly pissed off, and Tommy winces-this is *not* gonna be good, "I'm getting a little tired of you thinking you can get an easy ride through my class just because you're my brother. I care about you and I want you to do well, but you're clearly not reading the material, you spend all of your time in my class talking to Tubbo and Ranboo, and you're dangerously close to falling behind. You're a smart kid, Toms. I know that better than almost anyone. I know you're still recovering from your headaches, but you've got to do better."

Face flushing in embarrassment, Tommy's shoulders hunch up, and

his stance becomes more defensive. "Fuck you, man! I'm so *sorry* that I read the boring-ass book you picked out and can't really remember any of it, *Wilbur*. Clearly, I haven't had *anything else* going on for the past few days to worry about, right?! It's not like reading the tiny fuckin' text makes my eyes hurt and makes my migraines worse, *right?! Even with all that, I read the damn thing anyway!*" Tommy snaps, fists balled at his sides, and Wilbur just looks *bored*, which makes Tommy *furious*, because fuck Wilbur for being calm! *Fuck* Wilbur for looking at him like that, like he's just so much better than Tommy for not getting emotional. "You don't have any *idea* what's going on with me, Wilbur. God forbid I don't pay attention for one fucking day, man, I'm still almost top of the class!"

"Are you quite done? You're getting defensive over nothing here, man, I'm on your side," Wilbur says, tone flat, almost *amused*, and Tommy sees red. "You know, I'm required by the school to call a parent if disruptive behavior doesn't stop with a few warnings, but I've been really lenient with you, even though I should've called Phil a *while* ago. So I don't want any more excuses, Tommy. I've got to be professional at *some* point and do my job. I know you've got lots going on, and I know you're having a bad day, which is why I'm worried. You can talk to me, Toms, help *me* understand what's going on so I can help *you*."

Positively fuming and running a hand through his hair, Tommy feels The Sense flare up at the back of his mind, and he grabs Wilbur's wrist in midair. He doesn't want sympathy, and he definitely doesn't want whatever brotherly gesture Wilbur's about to offer. This whole thing is bullshit. Wilbur's acting all high and mighty, like he's the savior of the fucking universe for embarrassing Tommy constantly. Tommy's half-convinced he's actually just looking for an excuse to call Phil and get him in trouble.

Tommy drops Wilbur's wrist. "Don't fucking touch me, Wil," Tommy says, "I'm going to lunch. Call Phil if you want, see if I give a shit."

With that, he leaves the classroom, ignoring Wilbur's calls for him to come back, and Tommy stalks down the hall and takes his packed lunch to the table where he can see Tubbo and Ranboo are sitting. "Aye," he greets, and they nod, Ranboo silently sliding over his pack of twizzlers, and Tommy grins. They can't get this shit anywhere

else-Ranboo gets it shipped in every once in a while, and he only gets so much of it. "Need some good news, fellas. Wilbur was a bitch, as usual, so gimme something positive."

"I figured out what we'd need for our pressurized condiment dispenser, but it might be a little expensive," Ranboo says, sheepishly rubbing the back of his neck. Ah, that's right. Tommy had suggested it-a dispenser that detects how far and how big something is and sprays on *just* the right amount of whatever you want. It had been Tommy's idea, mostly; he wants to see if he can transform this project into a more efficient way to shoot his webs. Ranboo takes a twizzler, and Tommy scowls at him. "Would it be cool if we picked some of the stuff up? We can definitely write some of the code tonight, even if we don't build anything."

Tommy shrugs. "Was planning on grabbing stuff on my way home anyways, works for me," he says, and Ranboo's eyes crinkle up, a telltale sign he's grinning. Tommy opens up his lunch and stifles a smile at the *Give 'em hell, Toms!* Phil's written on the bag of crisps. Tommy clears his throat and chomps loudly on a crisp. "Whu'd'we need?"

"Close your mouth when you chew," Tubbo says, making a face, and Ranboo hands over a list scribbled on a napkin. As Tommy scans over what's written on it-the writing's so damn tiny, Tommy has half a mind to tell Ranboo to rewrite it-his enhanced peripheral vision catches Tubbo exchanging a wary glance with Ranboo. "Also, I don't think you should keep pissing off Mr. Soot anymore, Tommy, you could get into serious trouble."

"For fuck's sakes, Tubbo, not you as well," Tommy groans, tilting his head up at the ceiling and wincing *immediately* because of the lights. Tubbo starts to say something, but Tommy's phone buzzes loudly on the table, and he starts chomping on crisps as noisily as possible to further drown him out. Tubbo gives up, and Tommy picks up his phone. "Jesus Christ, what does Techno want now?"

why is wilbur saying you're being a dick.

because wilbur's a fucking bitch that's why

okay, true, but he's also threatening to tell phil about something that happened, so you should be careful.

don't piss him off again.

seriously.

i am also busy and do not want him to continue bothering me.

fine

both of you are dicks

i hate you

die

i feel brotherly affection for you as well.

behave.

i will set the school on fire actually

maybe i will commit crimes

do hard drugs

how about that techno

what if i want to commit crimes

tell phil so that he can get his fancy corporate lawyers to defend you.

very good point maybe sometimes you are smart but only a little

bitchno

goodbye, tommy.

bitch

Tommy tucks his phone back in his pocket, and Ranboo tilts his

head curiously. "Everything good, man?" he asks, and Tommy nods, pointedly ignoring Tubbo's glare. Yeah, maybe Tubbo has a point, but Tommy's got a lot on his mind right now, alright? Give him a break. Ranboo shifts in his seat, as if he can sense the tension. "Uh, we could get ice cream later too...? Like, before we go pick up the stuff we need for the project. All three of us, I mean."

"Sounds good to me, bossman," Tubbo says easily, and he looks at Tommy like a challenge, eyes narrowed and brows raised. Well, it's clearly an *attempt* at that, but Tubbo ends up sort of looking like he's high. Tommy just shrugs. He hasn't been able to handle anything sweet, so he'll probably end up just getting a normal flavor. Like vanilla. Tubbo snaps his fingers and his eyes go wide, and he turns to Ranboo, who stares back at him with eyes just as wide. "Right! Tommy asked me this the other day, and it made me start thinking- Ranboo, if you had a superpower, would you fight crime with it or not?"

Looking thoughtfully down at his half-eaten sandwich, Ranboo cups his chin with his hand. "I'd say it depends on the power, actually. Well, no-scratch that, I don't think I'd be able to go out and fight crime even *with* a superpower," he says, and Tubbo gestures for him to go on. Ranboo just shrugs. "Listen, I'm just not a crime-fighting sorta guy. Not that crime isn't bad, because I think it's safe to say that most crimes are bad, but I don't know if I'd be, like, confident enough to just go out and start throwin' hands with criminals."

Nodding wisely, Tubbo hums. "Ah, so you're not stupid enough to go getting yourself killed," he says, and Tommy takes offense to that. He's not going to get killed, he's got *superpowers*. Tubbo turns to Tommy again and puts his chin in his hand. "On the subject of superpowers, what would you lot pick if you could have a power? I think I'd pick electricity or something. Super handy for charging your phone."

"I think I'd go with, like, something to do with time. Pausing time or slowing it down," Ranboo elaborates, and Tommy pouts. He can't do either of those. "I always get super stressed when I think I don't have enough time to do something, and that'd be really helpful. I don't know for sure, though, it's hard to pick just one. What about

you, Tommy?”

And they're both looking at him expectantly now, which, admittedly, makes Tommy a little bit nervous. It's not as though he can say his *actual* superpowers, because when he actually does start to fight crime, they might figure out that it's him. “Uh, probably the power to fly or some shit,” he says instead of his ultra-cool spider powers, and his friends nod, as if to say *fair enough, Tommy, you're so cool and smart, Tommy*. Maybe they're not thinking that last bit, but it *is* objectively true. “Then I wouldn't have to walk with you assholes to school. I could jet around to all the women in London and make it to all of my many weddings with very real women on time.”

Snorting as the bell rings, Tubbo stands and pokes Tommy in the forehead. “Yeah, right, as if you've ever even spoken to a woman,” he says, and Tommy squawks in offense. Tubbo puts a hand on his shoulder and gives him a look of mock-sympathy. “Don't worry, Toms, you'll get there someday. Maybe a girl will look in your direction in, say, thirty years.”

Ranboo chuckles, and Tommy kicks Tubbo in the shin. “Please don't get in trouble for fighting in here again,” Ranboo says tiredly, and Tommy puts his chin high in the air, walking out first because he is clearly the bigger and much better person. Ah, fuck. The noise returns, as it would seem. He can't even properly pay attention to where he's going until Ranboo catches his wrist, a slightly concerned look in his eyes. “Tommy, you're going down the wrong hallway! Your biology class is over here, dude, what's *up* with you today?”

“Sorry, migraine,” Tommy explains away with a sheepish grin, and Ranboo just shakes his head.

Tommy knows he's going to have to find a way to navigate the halls without annihilating his senses eventually, but for now, he settles for Tubbo shoving headphones over his ears and playing terrible music.

Love how this chapter was essentially just like,

Wilbur: Hey, you're acting out more than usual and since I'm your brother, I'm worried and want to help you, but I also have to follow school policy.

Tommy: Shut the hell up bitch. Go kill yourself. Go sit in the middle of the road and let a car run over you. You're ugly, you're disgusting, I'm gonna kill you, give me 200 dollars.

Also, Wilbur absolutely has English lit teacher vibes, I can practically picture him in that corny ass cardigan and lanyard Imao you cannot change my mind

if you or a loved one can no longer eat sweets, ...

Chapter 4: if you or a loved one can no longer eat sweets, you may be entitled to financial compensation

Benchtrio gets some ice cream, alliumduo works on their project, and Tommy learns to sew.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“Welcome to the Frozen Cow, where our ice cream is so good, it’ll have you over the moon. How can I help you today?” the cashier asks in a monotone so flat it actually rivals Techno’s. She looks positively *over it*, blonde hair tied up in a ponytail behind her visor and her expression not nearly as cheery as all the cow-themed decor. Tommy tries to look at her nametag, but it’s smudged so badly all he can make out is the tail end of what might be an ‘a’ or a ‘q’.

Tubbo leans forward first and grins. “I’ll take a cotton candy shake in the biggest size you’ve got, please!” he says, and she nods, punching it into the register, expression still unchanging. It’s a little unsettling. He jerks his thumb over at Tommy, whose eyes go wide. “We’re all gonna be on the same tab, by the way, he’s paying.”

“Wha-! I never *said* that, Tubbo, you fuckin’ prick, for fuck’s-sine, whatever, yeah. I’ll just take a scoop of vanilla,” Tommy says, only remembering his manners when Ranboo elbows him in the side. He gives the ice cream girl an apologetic grin, but she doesn’t really seem to care, punching in his order as well and looking up at Ranboo expectantly.

Tommy does the same, glancing between the two of them. It's quite funny, actually. Ranboo, practically a ball of nerves, clearly very anxious about holding up the nonexistent line and inconveniencing a food service worker, and the ice cream girl, who would be incredibly intimidating if it weren't for the cute cartoon cow on her visor and the cow print apron she's probably required to be wearing.

After a moment of deliberation, Ranboo looks at the register and starts to finally give his order to the ice cream girl. "Right, uh, just some cookies n' creme in a waffle cone, if that's alright," he says, and she just punches it right in. "Thank you, by the way, sorry about the wait, there's just a lot of options, y'know?"

She blinks at him and nods once before turning to Tommy and holding her hand out. "It's gonna be seventeen quid even," the ice cream girl says, her accent weird around the word 'quid,' and Tommy hands over a bill, grumbling curses under his breath in Tubbo's direction. Stupid bastard, making *him* pay when all he's able to eat is a little bitch scoop of vanilla. The ice cream girl hands back his change and affixes Tommy with a flat look. "It'll be ready in a minute. You can sit anywhere you want. Have an udder-ly fantastic day."

As they get settled at a table, The Sense tells Tommy that someone's about to walk through the door, someone *dangerous*, and he looks up, immediately alarmed. A businessman enters the room, flanked by two other businessmen, all three of them in suits far too fancy for a hole-in-the-wall ice cream place on the quieter side of the city. There's something, just... off about their aura-not that Tommy buys into any of that aura shit, but The Sense has the hairs on his neck and arms on end, so something is *clearly* wrong.

Tubbo and Ranboo's conversation continues, and Tommy only kind of registers it, given that all of his attention is still on the businessmen. They're surprisingly rowdy, the one in the middle and the one on the right laughing uproariously and shoving at each other, the third looking on with a sort of bemused fondness, but none of them are even paying any attention to the ice cream girl, who is simultaneously pouring Tubbo's milkshake and trying to ask the businessmen for their order. She sighs and glares at the milkshake like it's personally offended her, then goes to start

scooping for Ranboo's waffle cone.

The businessmen are *loud*, and Tommy doesn't need enhanced hearing to recognize it, given that a few people, including Ranboo and Tubbo, turn heads in their direction, most of them annoyed. The Sense seems to dislike the middle one in particular, given that if Tommy focuses on him for too long, he feels a small rush of adrenaline. His hand clutches a little too hard to the table, and he dents it. Shit. Tubbo and Ranboo don't seem to notice, so Tommy just tries to ignore the businessmen. After all, he's probably just overreacting. Maybe one of them is, like, an undercover government agent and happens to have a weapon on him. That'd make more sense than some guy being dangerous enough on his own that The Sense has Tommy about ready to jump out of his seat and cling to the ceiling.

The ice cream girl comes over with their ice cream after another moment, throwing a glare over her shoulder at the businessmen still causing a racket before giving the trio at the table a strained, close-lipped smile and heading back behind the counter. Tommy stares just a *little* too hard at the group of businessmen, evidently, because Tubbo pokes him in the arm and gives him a questioning look, brows furrowed.

"What's got you all on edge?" he asks, and maybe Tommy hadn't been *quite* as low-key as he'd thought. He just shrugs, nodding over at the businessmen, and Tubbo hums. "Yeah, they're being pretty obnoxious, aren't they? Wish somebody would tell them to shut up, they're not even giving their order. Anyways, where are you two headed after this?"

He takes a massive sip of his milkshake and immediately winces, Ranboo stifling a snort beside him. Tommy outright laughs, making the businessmen glance in their direction, and the overwhelming feeling of *dangerdangerdanger* from The Sense shuts him up *very* quickly. "The fuck are you lot looking at?! Get your shit and go," he barks out before he can stop himself, and Ranboo smacks his leg, looking incredibly bewildered.

"Woah, that primary schooler looks kind of pissed off," the left one says, pushing his obnoxious sunglasses up his stupid nose. Tommy

bristles, and Tubbo kicks him under the table, which is stupid, because Tommy's not about to start a *fight* or anything, but these guys are being seriously disruptive to everybody in the shop. The left one looks to the one in the middle and grins. "You gonna let him talk to you like that?"

"Nah, I think you should shut him up," the right one chimes in, hair slicked back like something straight out of an American mobster movie. It doesn't suit him at all; Tommy thinks he looks like a right prick. Uptight, even. The right one also defers to the middle guy, who just tilts his head at Tommy, like he's trying to read into Tommy's soul. "I could do it for you, if you want."

Ranboo's waffle cone almost falls out of his hand as he goes to try and play peacekeeper, which is stupid, in Tommy's opinion. "We don't want any trouble, he just gets these headaches, he's sensitive to loud noises, that's all," he hurries to explain, and while most of it is kind of bullshit-not that Ranboo knows that-it *should* be enough to tide these guys over. Why are they so eager to pick a fight with some randos anyway?

The left one speaks up again, and The Sense hates that the middle one hasn't said anything at all yet. "If he's got a headache, he can fuck off to a library," he says, and The Sense declares that this guy's a fucking dick. Well, that's more Tommy than The Sense, but The Sense doesn't like him much either. "Isn't that right?"

Middle Man considers this for a moment, eyes narrowed at Tommy *still*, and The Sense wants him to hightail it out of here, but Tommy stands his ground and glares right back. Middle Man just shrugs and looks at the left one. "Chill out. Just some stupid kid," he says easily, and the right one scoffs, still giving Tommy the stink eye. Tommy decides that the right one is the biggest bitch of the three, followed closely by the left one. Jury's still out on Middle Man.

The ice cream girl clears her throat and stares flatly at Middle Man. "Dude. You've got to buy something or get out," she says, still monotone, and Tommy snickers as the trio of businessmen look taken aback. "I don't have the energy, nor do I get paid enough to waste my time giving a police statement if a fight breaks out here. Order or leave, man, let's go."

The businessmen hesitantly give her their order, and Ranboo tugs on Tommy's sleeve, nodding at the door. It's probably a good idea to get going, even if it's technically conceding defeat. Tommy never admits he's lost, because he's never lost. He's only ever postponed his victory, thank you very much. The three of them slip out of the ice cream shop, and Tubbo waves farewell as he takes his cotton candy milkshake down the opposite side of the street. Ranboo turns to Tommy expectantly, and Tommy takes a tentative bite of his ice cream; it's not terrible, but it's not great either. Not as bad as maple syrup, not as good as pizza.

"We're going to the craft store first, Ranboob," he declares, and Ranboo sighs at the nickname, but he follows Tommy down the road nonetheless. Things are still a little overwhelming-being outside, what with all of the sensations-but Tommy's banking on immersion therapy. So far, it's working. "Big man Tommy's got to pick up important big man fabric items."

"Big man Tommy should stop referring to himself in the third person," Ranboo mumbles, biting into his waffle cone. They walk down the street in sync, even though Ranboo's freakish height gives him a longer stride. Tommy considers this to be extremely unfair. He should be entitled to financial compensation for it, honestly. Ranboo glances at him and finishes up the last of his cone. "Why do you need fabric anyway? It wasn't on the list."

"I told you, it's big man business," Tommy says, feeling the tips of his ears get hot with embarrassment. It's fair, he supposes, for Ranboo to be curious, but Tommy doesn't exactly want to give him the actual reasoning behind it. But Ranboo just keeps *looking* at him, so Tommy fumbles to come up with something to keep Ranboo off his back. "It's for that biology project. The one with the, uh, bugs. Diagrams n' shit."

Ranboo doesn't look entirely convinced, but he drops the subject nonetheless as they approach the craft shop. It's run by Tubbo's aunt, Tommy knows, though he's never seen her in her store, only when he's over at Tubbo's house. Sure enough, as soon as they walk through the door, a flurry of white, poofy hair comes barreling at them, and Tommy is quickly wrapped up in a too-tight hug.

"Tommy! Ranboo! So good to see you two! What are you doing

here?" Puffy asks, pulling away from Tommy and proceeding to bury Ranboo in an equally tight hug.

"Tommy has to pick up stuff for a biology project," Ranboo answers, voice strained with the force of Puffy's hug, and Tommy snickers as she releases him, all bright smiles and sparkling eyes. Ranboo smooths down his shirt and adjusts the strap of his bag, and Tommy starts glancing around to see how the store's layout works. "How've you been, Ms. Puffy?"

"How many times do I have to tell you, Ranboo, just Puffy is fine," she scolds, a playful tone to her voice. She turns to Tommy and tilts her head, and he can see a few smears of paint on her face and arms. "You lookin' for something in particular, big guy? I can help you find it if you give me the specifics."

Shifting in place, Tommy glances between the other two. He's not entirely sure how to explain this. "Uh, d'you have something that could withstand, like, a lot of force n' shit? Like if I punched something really hard while wearing it, it wouldn't-fuckin' I dunno-explode or whatever?" he asks, and Puffy's brows furrow, her eyes wide. "Don't worry, it's not-! It's for a biology project, Puffy, don't read into it too much."

A wary expression on his face, Ranboo glances at him. "What kind of projects are you *doing* in that class, man?" he asks, sounding slightly incredulous, and Tommy waves him off. He doesn't need to get specific, Ranboo definitely doesn't need to know about his *actual* plans for the fabric he's buying. Taking a look at his phone, Ranboo hums, uncertain. "We should hurry here if we want to make it to the hardware store before it closes, by the way."

Puffy nods and straightens up. "Right, so, I'm guessing you want a fabric similar to what people use for athleticwear then," she says easily, leading Tommy down an aisle filled with bright fabrics, and Tommy immediately zeroes in on a red roll. Puffy smiles slyly and takes it off the shelf for him, and Tommy starts to protest; she puts a hand on her hip. "C'mon, Tommy, don't kid yourself. This fabric is pretty much what you're looking for anyway-most of the boxers that come in here for custom-made stuff have this one marked down as their go-to."

"Oh, *fuck* yeah," Tommy says, and Puffy swats at him. Rolling his eyes, Tommy holds his hands up in mock-surrender. "Alright, alright, I'll curb the swearing. Just for you, Captain Pussy."

She fixes him with a flat stare. Tommy grins.

When they get back to Tommy's house, it's with arms full of heavy-ass bags. Well, heavy for *Ranboo*, Tommy's epic and cool superpowers make it a piece of cake. Ranboo stumbles through the front door and Tommy holds it open for him, rolling his eyes. Really, Ranboo's only got, like, four bags, and Tommy's got six, so Tommy honestly thinks he's being dramatic. Just a tad.

In any case, The Sense says that someone's about to round the corner, and sure enough, there's Phil, arms crossed and he's *very* obviously not happy. He looks slightly surprised to see Ranboo, who waves awkwardly. "Oh, hello, Ranboo, always nice to see you, mate," Phil says, and Ranboo's probably doing that weird unsure smile he does sometimes, but The Sense is telling him to keep his eyes on Phil, so Tommy does. Sure enough, Phil turns back towards him. "Tommy, can I speak with you about what's happened today after Ranboo goes home?"

It's more of a statement than an actual question. Phil wants to *talk*, which means Wilbur was a bitch and snitched on him, and Tommy would like nothing more than to *not* talk about it, so he whirls around and stares Ranboo down. "Ranboo, would you like to stay over tonight?" he asks flatly, and Ranboo makes a choked noise in the very back of his throat. Phil starts to say something, but Tommy cuts him off. "*Ranboo*, would you *like* to stay *over*?"

"I-if that's... cool with Mr. Watson...?" Ranboo suggests, and Tommy wants to throttle him, spineless bastard that he is. Tommy is being more than a little insistent about this here, he could really use some fucking *help*, Ranboo, could he be any more *obvious*, Ranboo?! Apparently, his pointed glare works, and Ranboo nods fervently. "Yeah, actually, I'd love to, is that fine? It's fine if not, I, uh- I *definitely* want to. This is something that I think would be in my best interest, as a matter of fact."

Phil sighs, but he nods nonetheless. "We're talking about this tomorrow morning," he warns, and Tommy waves his hand in an 'eh' motion, but Phil actually looks kind of serious as he shakes his head. "No. We *are*. Tommy, Wil called me at my office today. I gave you space, but we're going to have to talk about it, and I'm not kidding around."

"Okay, fine, can Ranboo and I go now? We've a project to work on, and it's for The Warden's class, so...?" Tommy trails off, and while Phil sighs again, he *does* gesture for them to go ahead, and Tommy practically yanks Ranboo up the stairs. Right. He's gotta be careful about his super strength. Can't go around yanking people's arms off, no sir. Tommy shuts the door and sets the bags on his desk, and Ranboo practically collapses backwards onto his bed. "Um, excuse you, get your ass up. We've got work to do."

Groaning dramatically, Ranboo sinks further into the covers; Tommy's not entirely sure how that's possible. "I'm going to become one with your mattress," Ranboo says warningly, and Tommy whacks him over the head with a pillow. He sputters, and Tommy cackles, straightening up as The Sense warns him of the pillow about to smack him. He deftly ducks out of the way like a super cool action movie hero, and Ranboo gawks at him. "How did you do that?!"

"I am simply better than you, boob boy," Tommy says, stance triumphant as he jumps back from another potential pillow attack. Ranboo huffs and sets the pillow down, leaving them in an uneasy truce. Tommy plops down into his desk chair and spins. "Get your laptop up and running, Ranboo, we've got code to write. C'mon, chop chop, big man Tommy doesn't have all day for your *laziness*."

Ranboo pulls his laptop out of his bag as he shakes his head. "I am once again asking you to stop talking in third person," he grumbles, and Tommy kicks at his ankles. Ranboo stretches out his hands and readies them over the keyboard. "Right, so we'll have to teach it how to measure distances, which shouldn't be *too* hard. In theory, at least. It's like those temperature guns, right? Like, the kinds where you go *pew* and the laser hits something and-

"Yes, I get it, type away," Tommy interrupts, and though Ranboo

glares at him, he starts typing anyway. Tommy vaguely remembers this stuff-this class is one of his worst, and Tubbo's better at coding than he is-but Ranboo very *clearly* knows what he's doing, so Tommy leaves him to it, opening up a notebook to start making blueprint sketches. "Right, we should make it so that someone can hold it, but do we want it on the palm or over the fingers?"

He *actually* wants his modified version to slip over his wrist, concentrating on the web fluid release points, but he can work that out in his free time. Ranboo hums thoughtfully, examining his own hand and moving it around, like he's testing the two options out. "I mean, we could fit more stuff in if it goes over the knuckles, but fitting it in the palm of your hand feels like a more, like, *snappy* tagline, y'know?" he says eagerly, and Tommy grins. Ranboo tilts his head down and holds his mouse like a microphone, putting on a stupid commercial guy voice. "Introducing the new condiment dispenser from Tanboo Tech! A gadget so neat, it fits in the palm of your hand! Our condiment dispenser is so convenient, you can spend all the time you'd previously spent making sandwiches by hand like a chump on other, more important things! Like filling out your divorce papers! Committing crimes! Quitting your job because Dave in HR gave you a bad employee review and being fired would look bad on your resumé!"

Tommy bursts out laughing and smacks the desk, but he fucking breaks a chunk off of it, and Ranboo stares with wide eyes, faux infomercial forgotten. "Okay, don't freak out," Tommy says, and Ranboo's eyes flit back and forth between the broken piece of *desk* on the floor and Tommy's face. An excuse bubbles in his throat like bile, and Tommy just regurgitates it, words leaving faster than he can keep them in. "It's an old-ass desk, I've been meaning to ask Phil for a new one, but, like, it's-with everything else going on, I don't want to-I don't want to fucking *burden* him right now, man, just... just don't say anything, okay?"

Brows furrowing with worry, Ranboo hesitantly reaches out. Guilt burns in Tommy's gut; he doesn't want to fucking lie about it, but what choice does he have? He's already got yards of fabric sitting in a bag on his desk, he's got no doubts he's going to do this, he *can't* endanger anyone. "Hey, don't worry, I'm not gonna... it's no big

deal, man,” Ranboo reassures him, and Tommy gives him a strained smile. Ranboo’s eyes search his face for... something, Tommy doesn’t know what.

“Yeah, yeah, let’s get back to it, Ranboob,” Tommy says, uncomfortable with the attention. It’s not as if Ranboo’s being overt about it, but he can tell he’s concerned, which just won’t do. The last thing he needs is for Ranboo to go poking around and find out Tommy’s got super epic and cool superpowers. “Anyway, what do you want to-”

The door bursts open so fast that The Sense barely has time to warn him, and Techno’s pointing a sword at him. Ranboo looks rather perturbed, but Tommy just blinks up at him. This is a normal occurrence in their household, but Tommy can understand why Ranboo’s been startled by it. “Vampire,” Techno grunts out, and Tommy touches the tip of the sword. It’s probably silver, or at least silver-plated, given what Techno’s been trying to prove for the past three days.

“Oh, how it hurts,” Tommy delivers in the flattest voice he can manage. Techno nods easily and sheaths his sword at his hip. Freak. Tommy turns back towards his notebook, sketching more of the preliminary design. “Techno, go away, Ranboo and I have a project to work on and your bitch-ness is getting in the way.”

“I’ll prove you’re a vampire one of these days,” Techno says, and Ranboo laughs a little, both of them turning to look at him with furrowed brows. Techno clears his throat and tries to lean nonchalantly against the doorframe, but Tommy narrows his eyes. He can see through Techno’s bullshit from miles away. Sighing, Techno makes a face and runs a hand through his hair. “Phil wants me to ask if you’re willin’ to go talk to him now rather than tomorrow, but he wants me to ask in a way where it seems like he’s not *making* me ask, and it’s just... it’s not workin’ out.”

Tommy folds his hands in his lap. “Tell Phil that I will be going to Tubbo’s house tomorrow, first thing in the morning,” he says, and Ranboo holds his head in his hands, shaking it in disbelief. It shouldn’t surprise him, honestly, Tommy *really* doesn’t want to have to hear a Dad Lecture from Phil. An idea occurs to him, and a

mischievous grin spreads across his face. "As a matter of *fact*, why don't you let dear old Dadza know that I'll *only* be willing to talk about this with Kristin?"

It's a brilliant idea, truly, Kristin's been on a business trip in the States for *ages* now. There's *no way* he's going to have to talk about it anytime soon, given the fact that Phil will probably be his usual understanding self and respect Tommy's wishes. And yeah, maybe Tommy feels a *little* guilty for taking advantage of it, but honestly, everyone's been all over him lately, and Tommy doesn't need Phil getting on his case too. Wilbur's already been an ass, Techno's certainly no help, and his friends *can't* know.

Tommy's alone in this, and right now, he *likes* it that way. No one else is in any danger, nor will they be in the future, and while his family might be peeved at him temporarily, it's better than the alternative. Phil'd probably lock him up in his room to keep him safe. Well, maybe not *lock him in*, but he'd get *so* much clingier. Fucker that he is.

"If you say so," Techno says uneasily-a tone that's pretty unfamiliar coming from him-and he shuffles in place a little. Tommy looks at him expectantly as Ranboo goes back to typing away on his laptop, and Techno fiddles with the handle of his sword. Just as Tommy's about to tell him to spit it out, Techno clears his throat. "Uh, you can... talk to me. If you want. If that's-if you need to, or you're comfortable with it. Just a door down. Or somethin' like that."

Before Tommy can even respond, Techno's disappeared downstairs, and he's left a little dumbfounded. Ranboo glances up at him and raises a brow. "Back to work, man, we've only got a week and a half for this project and I'm *not* risking my grade for you," he says, pointing at Tommy, and in turn, Tommy sticks his tongue out at him.

Later that night, when Ranboo's passed out in a nest of blankets on the floor, Tommy creeps over to his closet and opens it as quietly as he can. There are a few options, but most of them are things he wears regularly, and while Tommy's fairly confident in his sewing

abilities, if he fucks them up, he's not entirely sure he'll be able to get them back in mint condition. His eyes fall on a plain white hoodie about four sizes too big on him towards the back of his closet; he only ever wears it when everything else is dirty and it's not at all easily recognizable.

He takes it out of the closet and steps carefully around Ranboo, who's started to snore a little, and lays the hoodie out on the bed next to the red fabric from Puffy's store. The colors go together pretty well, but Tommy's not about to wear long sleeves on top of a supersuit. He grabs a pair of scissors from his desk and carefully cuts the sleeves so that they'll end up hanging by his elbows. That should be fine; he'll be good in cold and rainy weather, and he can always roll up his sleeves in warmer weather.

Now, does he want shorts or joggers? Joggers seem tacky, honestly, but Tommy's only got a few pairs of shorts, and he doesn't exactly want to attempt to steal a pair from Wilbur or Techno at one in the morning. He looks between the fabric and the cut portion of the sleeves from the hoodie, and an idea forms in his mind.

Tommy spends the next ten minutes googling how to sew a pair of shorts.

The product is... clearly amateur, given he's only working with Kristin's mini sewing kit and a whole lotta hope, but they look pretty good nonetheless. Red on the top half, kinda like a belt, and white for the rest. Truly iconic. Tommy grins at his handiwork and sets both the hoodie and the shorts aside, and he glares at the remaining red fabric-which is a lot of it, he's not about to complain-and starts googling again.

The bodysuit is *far* harder to sew together. He's determined to do it without a machine, though, because he's not about to go ask Puffy if he can use her industrial one. He struggles through it, and he does *well*, dammit, he's the *best*, and is fairly satisfied with the result. It's not the best in the world, and he'll probably have to patch it up every once in a while, but it'll definitely do for now. The white thread in the sewing kit, paired with the embroidery circles, gives Tommy a rather ambitious idea.

He's not entirely sure why he's decided to go with a red and white theme-in the back of his mind, he wonders if it's because the spider from the tube line had a similar color scheme-but it works pretty well. And if Tommy's following a YouTube tutorial on spiderweb embroidery until the sun rises, that's his business.

Surprisingly, Tommy's hardly tired by the time he's stashing the half-finished suit away in the back corner of his closet. He'll be able to finish it soon, whenever he ends up coming back home from Tubbo's today, but he's not discouraged by his having to postpone it. Tommy won't really be able to get around to *do* any crime fighting until his web shooters-which he has now named because it's an incredibly cool and badass name-are finished and perfected.

Ranboo grumbles, and Tommy glances over at him as he wakes up, hair sticking up in all different directions and eyes fluttering open. "Well, good morning to you too, big man," Tommy says, slightly amused as Ranboo almost smacks himself in the face as he stretches. "Hope you slept well. On the floor. Where you belong."

"If you don't shut up, I might actually have to kill you," Ranboo groans, rubbing his eyes as he sits up properly. Tommy pokes him in the head with his foot, and Ranboo karate-chops his ankle lightly. Grinning, Tommy opens up the curtains in one swift movement, and Ranboo yelps, hurrying to shield his eyes. "Tommy! Wh-dude, *not* cool!"

"Wakey, wakey, boob boy, big man Tommy wants his breakfast!" Tommy bellows, smacking Ranboo over the head with a pillow. Idly, The Sense gives him a tingly sensation in the back of his head, and Tommy looks over to the door a *little* too early before it opens; luckily for him, Ranboo's too tired to notice. "Oh, hello, Phil, don't mind me, just committing a little bit of murder before the most important meal of the day!"

Sighing, Phil shakes his head, a soft smile on his face. "You boys are unbelievable. Ranboo, there's eggs, bacon, and toast downstairs if you'd like," he says, and Ranboo practically springs out of bed, sprinting away from Tommy's oncoming pillow warfare. Leaving him utterly alone with Phil, who fixes him with a painfully paternal look. Jesus. This won't end well. "Toms, I'm glad you're

willing to talk to *someone* about this, even if it's not me or your brothers. I won't hold you up long, don't worry, I just wanted to say... I'm here for you, kid."

And there's the kicker. Stupid Phil and his stupid sincerity. "Thanks," Tommy says, smiling in an unreasonably awkward manner. Phil pats his shoulder, which is equally as awkward, and nods for Tommy to follow him downstairs for breakfast. Even if Tommy's dreading seeing Wilbur, if he's home at all right now, his spider-metabolism is going *nuts* at the prospect of food. Dashing down the stairs-probably dangerous, considering he's taking them two at a time-Tommy skids to a stop by the breakfast bar. "Ayup, Ranboob, toss me a pancake, yeah?"

"I will do no such thing," Ranboo shoots back with an annoyed glare, and Tommy flips him off as he hops into a stool. He shoves half a pancake into his mouth and wrinkles his nose at the maple syrup. Ranboo looks surprised at that, and he starts to hand the bottle over, but Tommy almost gags, and he quickly sets it back down. "Did you develop an aversion to syrup overnight or something, dude? Jeez."

"Something like that," Tommy mutters, shoving his eggs around on his plate with his fork, and Ranboo snorts. The two of them eat in silence for a few minutes, and then The Sense is giving him that tingly sensation again, and Tommy resists the urge to groan out loud, because those are *Wilbur's* footsteps, too light to be Techno's and too in-rhythm to be Phil's, and he really doesn't want to deal with Wilbur right now. "Good morning, bitch."

"Shut up, child," Wilbur says back immediately, sounding like his voice has just been dragged to hell and back. He picks up the syrup bottle and fucking *chugs*, and Tommy actually gags this time. Wilbur then goes to pour himself an enormous mug of black coffee, but he pauses, raising a brow at Ranboo, who, when Tommy looks over, is staring wide-eyed at Wilbur. "Can I help you with something, Ranboo...?"

Ranboo sputters out some incoherent syllables, then shakes his head, as if to clear his thoughts, which Tommy chuckles at. The sound makes Ranboo whip his head over to look at him-must give

him a twinge of pain, judging by his moment of hesitancy. “Wh-Tommy, you *live* with Mr. Soot?!” he whispers, almost a hiss, and Tommy blinks at him.

“Ranboo, he’s my *brother*,” he says, and Ranboo’s mouth hangs open. Tommy scoffs, but the shocked look on Ranboo’s face remains. Tommy puts his hand on Ranboo’s shoulder. “Ranboo, you’ve been to my house *so many times*.”

“How was I supposed to know?! I’ve never actually seen him here!” Ranboo whisper-yells, and Tommy smacks him upside the head. He should really stop whispering, it’s not like Wilbur can’t hear them.

Sipping from his mug, Wilbur’s amused grin peeks out from behind the ceramic. “Ranboo, why else do you think I call Tommy ‘Thomas’ in my class?”

Ranboo gestures vaguely with his hands. “I don’t know! Because you’re oblivious to how much he hates it?” he guesses, and Tommy shakes his head, hand sliding off of Ranboo’s shoulder.

“Oh, no, I’m well aware,” Wilbur says, “that’s *exactly* why I do it.”

Bastard.

Tommy refusing to talk about his emotions 2, electric boogaloo

baby's first patrol

Chapter 5: baby's first patrol

Exactly what the title says, we're finally getting into the good stuff, baybeeeeee!!!!

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

It's finally finished.

His one true masterpiece.

The suit is complete, at long last.

It's been two whole weeks, and Tommy's been 'training' in the backyard-as best as he can, at least-whenver he's gotten the chance between working on the suit, homework, and his programming project with Ranboo. Which, admittedly, isn't as often as he'd like, but Tommy's really learned his limits now, especially with how high he can jump. He hadn't *exactly* made it onto the roof, but he'd gotten close! Tommy had hoped he could make the suit somewhat aerodynamic, but he's rather attached to the hoodie now, and he'd hate to lose it, even if it would mean being a *teensy* bit more agile than his already enhanced muscles make him. He's also mastered the art of sticking and unsticking; all he has to think of is Henry's calming little face, and he's home-free. It had come in handy every time the needle and thread had gotten stuck to his fingers.

Tommy had almost gotten caught sewing by Techno a few times which, needless to say, had been a very odd experience. Techno's *never* gone so far out of his way to interact with Tommy, especially not barging into his room as soon as he gets home and just sort of standing there until Tommy asks him what the fuck he wants.

Tommy now owns a sword. He's not gotten caught by Phil or Wilbur yet, not by a longshot, but he's assuming that's because they're not as stealthy as Techno. The Sense always finds them way ahead of time.

Of course, Tommy can't really test it out just yet, given that he *definitely* hasn't perfected the web shooters. He's been working on them alongside his project with Ranboo-they'd managed to make their project work really well, actually. Tommy's kind of surprised that they'd only had to go to Tubbo for a little bit of help. Sam had been really impressed when Tommy had given the presentation, and Ranboo had successfully sprayed butter across a piece of toast from halfway across the room. Hell, even *Tommy* had been a little impressed that it had worked.

Tongue poking out from his teeth, Tommy fiddles with one of the wires in the paneling, web shooter fastened around his wrist so that he can get a feel for it. The web shooter sparks, and Tommy jumps, a web shooting instinctively out from his wrist and sticking to the ceiling. He sighs-that's gonna be a *bitch* to get off later. Tommy goes back to work on the wiring, adjusting the positive end of the electrical source so that it'll source its energy more efficiently.

The pressurization in the web shooter isn't the problem, it's the damn battery running out. He'd figured out how to properly reduce the air pressure so that his web fluid would be drawn out in larger and more concentrated lines. Tommy kind of wants to use Phil's credit card to order one of those weird atomic batteries that last, like, *forever*, but he'd probably get in trouble for it. A groan escapes him as the battery sparks again. Leaning back in his chair, Tommy's eyes wander around the room and settle on his reserve charger.

More specifically, his *solar power* reserve charger.

Fucking *bingo*, bitch!

Tommy grins and immediately gets to work, screwing and unscrewing and plier-ing and wiring, hustling like there's no tomorrow. This shit is so fucking exciting! He feels so fucking cool, like there's no one in the world who could do this as well as he can. Which, he supposes, is objectively true, given the whole spider

superpowers thing. "I am so epic and amazing," Tommy mumbles to himself as the panels in the web shooters light up. He grins as the teeny tiny engine starts to whirl. "The world's biggest fucking man, that's me, I am *so* cool!"

He hurries to close up the panel, and he opens up his window, leaning backwards. "Tommy, what on earth are you doing?" Techno's monotone drawl sounds from his doorway, and Tommy jumps-that's two times in the span of twenty minutes, son of a bitch-and hits his head on the top of the window as he ducks back in. "Dude. C'mon. Get it together."

"Fuck you, bitch, I'm-I've got it *so* together, I'll fucking-I'll stab you, I've a sword now," Tommy threatens, and Techno just looks at him. He deflates, and Techno chuckles, walking over to ruffle Tommy's hair. Which, of course, fucking ruins it. "I hate you so much, I hope you die. What are you doing in my room anyway, man?"

Techno crosses his arms, an eyebrow raised. "Are you doin' drugs?" he asks, and Tommy can't exactly help it when he bursts out laughing. Techno looks amused, too. "Alright, not drugs, then, but... seriously, Tommy, what's goin' on? I mean, first, you get your weird headaches, which, I know, you don't wanna talk about 'em, I get that. Then, you get in trouble with Wilbur, who *never* calls home, at least not to *professionally* complain about you. And now, you're either locked in your room or you're at school, which isn't like you. So. What's happenin' with you?"

Well, shit. Maybe Tommy hasn't been as secretive as he'd hoped. "I have no idea what you're talking about," he says, and blatant confidence has definitely never failed him. Alas, Techno seems rather unimpressed. "I'm serious, it's just-I dunno, man, fuckin' teenage bullshit. You were a teenager once, I'm assuming, when the dinosaurs were still around."

"Save the old man jokes for Phil, I'm not even the oldest brother," Techno says, nodding at the bed, and Tommy begrudgingly sits down, Techno sitting down beside him. "It is... very safe to say that I'm incredibly emotionally unavailable to everyone, all of the time. *However*, Wilbur seems to think that you're doin' this to spite him specifically, and Phil's convinced you're gonna talk to Kristin about

it, which-before you say anything-I know it's bullshit. I've pulled that card too many times to be blissfully ignorant. So... talk to me. What's goin' on?"

Tommy swallows and runs a hand through his hair. "Techno, I... I didn't mean to worry you," he says, finally something *honest*, which feels like a fucking ocean of relief. Leg bouncing, Tommy pulls his sleeves further over the web shooters. "It's, um-it's what Wilbur's thinking, I'm just trying to fuck with him. Okay, fuck, *shit*, I know you're not buying it. I *can't* tell you, Tech. I just... I can't."

Closing his eyes, Techno sighs. "Is it puberty stuff?" he asks, and Tommy chokes on his own spit.

"Uh. Sure...?"

"I'm gonna leave now. I've changed my mind. *Please* don't talk to me," Techno says, and he promptly makes his way out the door, slamming it shut.

That worked out.

Tommy hurries back over to the window, leaning backwards. Alright, take two. Rolling up his sleeves, Tommy aims at the very edge of the roof and *shoots*. A long strand of web flies out from his wrist and latches firmly to it. A surprised laugh bubbles from his throat involuntarily, and Tommy carefully worms his way out, positioning himself on the outside edge of the windowsill, and he takes a deep breath, crouching on the fucking *wall*. God, Tommy's fucking *cool*. He jumps a little, just to test out the momentum, then a little more, then more until he's fucking swinging on the roof of his *house*.

And the web is holding his weight! Tommy lands firmly on the side of the house again and gently lets himself hang in midair above the bushes. Just in case. He starts building up momentum again, swinging back and forth until he jumps as high as he fucking can and *aims*, hoping to God that this works. He shoots a web at the very top of the house and tugs as he reaches the peak of his jump, and-!

He slams into the side of the roof. Not a great start.

Silently thanking the fact he can stick to the roof with just his hands, Tommy takes a minute to recover. He clammers his way onto the roof and rests there, on his hands and knees as he gulps for air. *Shit*, that had hit him harder than he'd expected. Weirdly enough, though, the pain is going away kind of... rapidly. Hm. He'll have to test out his regeneration skills soon, he supposes, but that's a plan for another day.

Tommy looks around the backyard, and he spots a particularly tall tree. Perfect. He heads to the opposite edge of the roof and braces himself, making a running start and shooting a web off to the top of the tree. Tommy tugs as hard as he can and *jumps*, releasing the web in mid-air and landing on one of the higher branches. He fucking *did* it.

He did it!

Tommy whoops and spins around on one foot, counting on that superpowered grip to keep him steady, and it *does*. He's a goddamned superhero! An actual fucking superhero! Tommy cheers again, a shaky grin on his face. He sniffs, and his eyes start to sting. Aw, *shit*, he's getting emotional. But who cares! Superheroes can get emotional. Tommy's decided, because he's simply the best superhero to ever exist. Well, the *only* superhero-that he knows of-but he's still the best.

The Sense makes the back of his head tingle so badly that he shivers, and he locks his eyes on the back door. Sure enough, Phil comes out of the house, mug in hand and clearly exhausted, and he stops in his tracks when he spots Tommy up in the treetops. "Okay, I'm too fucking tired to deal with this, but how the *fuck* did you get your ass up there, Tommy?" he asks, and Tommy just cackles. Phil sighs and shakes his head. "Please get down *safely* so that I can tell Kristin that you lot are still all in one piece when she calls me tonight."

"Yeah, yeah, I've got this, old man, don't you worry!" Tommy calls, and Phil, likely despite his better judgement, goes back into the house. Tommy jumps off of the branch and swings to another tree, then another, then lands in a goddamned superhero pose-because he is *so* fucking cool-in the grass. He strolls in like an absolute

badass, snatching Techno's mug from his hands and downing the very sweet coffee that Techno refuses to admit he drinks. "Hello, family full of bitches, I am the alpha male and you must all bow before me!"

"Good luck with that one, puberty boy," Techno grumbles, snatching his coffee back and wiping the lip of the mug with a disgusted curl of his mouth. Tommy shoves his head to the side. Phil looks at the two of them quizzically, and Techno gives him a grim look. "Don't ask, Phil, you don't wanna know. Trust me."

Phil shakes his head, but he returns to his old man meal of tea and crumpets anyway. Wilbur peeks his head in from the hall, eyes wide. "What are we not supposed to ask? Because I'm *definitely* going to ask now," he says, and Tommy flips him off. "Ooh, are we making fun of Tommy? You guys know not to start without me!"

"Die," Tommy tells him flatly. Wilbur just laughs, bitch that he is. "Phil, can we sell Wilbur?"

"Who would we be selling him to?" Phil asks, but he's not against the idea. Tommy grins.

"I think we might have to pay for someone else to take him, nobody's gonna shill out for him," Techno pipes up, and Wilbur tackles him into the couch. "Watch the coffee, Wil. I'll spill it on you if you're not careful."

"No you won't," Phil says.

A sigh sounds from the couch. "No I won't," Techno grumbles. Wilbur cackles.

It's going to be *fine*. He's just going to go on a quick patrol around his neighborhood, see if anything's happening. There's no reason to be nervous, and Tommy's a big man who *never* gets nervous, and his hands are definitely not shaking. He'd tried out the suit a couple of days ago and fitted the feet with soles from an old pair of trainers and fashioned the hands into gloves with removable fingertips-for

easier access sticking to slippery surfaces. He's not going through *that* again. The suit is *great*, his web shooters are *great*, and Tommy's great.

So why the fuck is he so nervous?!

No, he's not nervous. Tommy never gets nervous. He doesn't even know what that word means, thank you very much. "You're gonna be fine, big man," Tommy says, and maybe talking to himself isn't the world's greatest sign that things are actually fine, but who cares? Tommy's a superhero now, he doesn't have to adhere to 'normal' anymore. "Just start swinging."

He pulls his mask over his face and takes a running start off of the roof, latching a web onto their neighbor's roof, and now he's *swinging from building to building, holy shit this is so fucking cool*. Tommy laughs joyously, picking up momentum. This is so much easier than he thought it'd be! He whizzes past house after house, keeping an eye out for people on the ground through his excitement. Some people spot him and point-which is rude, but understandable-and others take a few pictures; Tommy can hear their camera shutters going off even as he speeds past. Who even keeps their ringer on nowadays?

As he gets closer to the edge of the city, Tommy regards the alleyways with scrutiny. Shady things happen in alleyways, or so he hears. Crouching on the edge of a building-a building!-he looks around, waving down at some passersby. They freeze, stare for a moment, and then proceed to whip out their phones. Tommy gives them a bit of a pose; what can he say? Wilbur's knack for dramatics must be rubbing off on him.

He perks up after a moment, though, because his enhanced hearing catches a scream a good ways away. Tommy gives the people on the street-a small crowd, now-a two-fingered salute and jumps up, swinging away on a web. He gets closer to the source of the scuffle, and he lands atop a nearby roof, eyes narrowing as he stares down at the scene.

There are two guys cornering someone, one of them is *clearly* armed, and Tommy frowns at that. Aiming down, he shoots out a

web and it latches to the gun. Tommy yanks it up and grabs it, flipping the safety on and waving the pistol tauntingly as the goons on the ground look up at him. Noticed at last. He hops down and lands in front of the person being cornered, and the idiots look at him like he's crazy. Assholes.

"Who the *fuck* are you?" one of them asks, and Tommy grins, but they can't see it behind the mask, sadly. He probably looks *so* badass right now. He tosses the useless gun down the alleyway and webs it to the ground.

Stretching and getting into a defensive stance, Tommy tilts his head. "I'm the guy that's gonna kick your ass," he quips, swinging a kick at the guy towards his right. Techno's always taught him to fight with the side his dominant hand's on. The guy absolutely *does not* see it coming, and Tommy quickly realizes he's not holding his strength back as much as he'd like, given the guy's knocked out cold already. He's breathing, though. Tommy had checked. "Oh. Hey, hey, *hey*, buddy, you're not going anywhere!"

The other guy had tried to run as soon as Tommy had knocked out his friend, but he fires a web off at his feet, making him trip and eat shit on the pavement. Tommy winces. He's *really* gotta work on how he fights. He webs up the guy on the ground for good measure and turns to the person he's been protecting. Surprisingly, they haven't run away yet.

"Thanks for saving me," they say, and their voice is startlingly deep-Tommy's briefly reminded of Wilbur for a moment. The person sticks out a hand, and Tommy shakes it. "I'm Eret, any pronouns. I know the robber asked earlier, and given that you've got that... outfit on, you probably don't want anyone knowing, but... who are you?"

Tommy wracks his brain. Spider superpowers. Big man Tommy. Spider. Big man. "Um, spider... man...?" he says, voice cracking. He clears his throat and stands up straight, chest puffed out and hands on his hips. He lowers the pitch of his voice a little, for good measure. "The name's Spider-Man. You should call the police force and let them take these criminals into custody."

The person-Eret-looks rather amused. "Uh huh," they say, an

eyebrow raised. Their expression turns genuine after another moment. "Thank you, Spider-Man. Seriously."

Shooting a two-fingered salute at Eret, Tommy latches onto a building and swings up and away, an immense sense of pride having settled in his chest. Being a superhero is so fucking *cool*, and Tommy is the world's greatest and biggest man ever. *Spider-Man*. The name isn't the most creative, but it's still ridiculously awesome.

Tommy glances down at the street and spots a familiar head of pink hair, and he swings down lower, landing on a storefront's awning. Sticking a web to the underside of the awning, he lowers himself until he's hanging upside-down in front of her. Niki squeaks. "Oh my God," she squeaks, struggling to hold the bags in her hands, "you're upside-down."

"And you're clearly having trouble with those. Can I help you with them, Ni-miss?" he asks, tilting his head to try and convey a smile without access to his facial expressions. She nods, still completely dumbfounded, and Tommy flips himself rightside-up again, opening his arms up and happily taking her bags. It's the least he can do-she curves every grade she's allowed to and is easily the nicest teacher he's ever met. "Where to, miss?"

Vaguely, Niki points in the opposite direction he's facing, and Tommy falls back to be in step with her. She's openly ogling him, not that he can blame her; it's not every day that you find yourself face-to-face with the world's greatest and newest superhero. "Why are you-you're helping me with my groceries?" she asks, sounding a little empty, and Tommy nods. They're not heavy at all, but then again, Niki doesn't have super strength. "*Why?!*"

"Because you look like you needed help," Tommy answers easily, and Niki just shakes her head ever-so-slightly, like she can't believe it. "You look like you've got questions. D'you have questions for me, miss? I've got answers, but you can only have some of 'em. Can't exactly go around telling you my actual name or anything."

"Do you-you were upside-down. Have you got superpowers, or are you just, like, really good with technology?" she asks, and Tommy grins, jumping a good meter and a half off of the ground, still

perfectly balancing her groceries. People are taking pictures-good, maybe the crime rate will start going down without him having to even do anything. Criminals will know that he's out there now. That a superhero's gonna stop the wrong'uns. "So you've got superpowers, then. Good to know. Are you going to rob me?"

Tommy snorts, shifting the grocery bags in his arms as they wait for the crosswalk signal to change. "Would kinda defeat the point of being a superhero, wouldn't it?" he jokes, and Niki blinks, stopping in her tracks. "S'this your building?"

Niki nods, and he hands her the bags. As he goes to swing away, she grabs his arm, and he looks back at her. Her eyes search over his mask, and her brows furrow. "Who *are* you?" she asks, and Tommy leans back as she lets go of his arm.

"Just your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man," he says, swinging up and over the skyline.

School is so fucking fun when he gets there tomorrow.

The whole student body is buzzing with the news of the 'new and mysterious superhero' that's emerged, and Tommy, for one, can't wait to hear what his friends have to say about it. They're bound to think his alter ego is the coolest guy in the whole of London, if not the entire fucking *world*. Tommy hasn't gotten a chance to properly talk to them yet, but they're about to sit down for lunch, which means he'll get to hear about how awesome he is for an hour straight.

Sliding easily into his seat, Tommy grins at Tubbo and Ranboo. "So, fellas, heard about that spider dude from the news?" he asks, and Tubbo absolutely *lights* up, nodding with the biggest grin Tommy's seen from him in ages. "Opinions? I think he seems like an alright guy, what about you lot?"

"He's so cool!" Tubbo shouts before Ranboo can even open his mouth. "Dude, did you *see* him on Twitter?! He's still number one on trending after an entire day, that's *got* to be a world record or something, but that's besides the point-! Spider-Man's got fuckin'

superpowers, I never thought I'd see the day! Dude, could you imagine how strong that guy's gotta be? Mans jumped, like, two meters without *any* outside influence. I'm not-physics isn't my strong suit, but that's gotta be a crazy amount of force. And those *webs*? I'm assuming that's all chemistry-or maybe his body naturally produces that stuff-but the shooters it comes out of? That's *insane* tech!"

Ranboo looks uneasy as Tubbo turns to him, and Tubbo's excitement visibly dims. So does Tommy's, but he tries not to let it show. They both look at Ranboo expectantly, and he squirms under the attention. "I mean... I just think it's a little too good to be true," he says. When Tubbo goes to argue, Ranboo puts his hands up placatingly. "I'm *saying*, a superhero popping up out of nowhere? There's either a reason he's here, which could be shady or *not* shady, or someone's gonna take the opportunity to be the supervillain to his superhero."

"You're objectively wrong," Tubbo says matter-of-factly, and Tommy snickers. Ranboo shakes his head, and Tubbo shoves him. "The guy said it himself, he's just a friendly neighborhood Spider-Man! He helped Niki with her groceries, man! Anybody that Niki Nihachu trusts is trustworthy in my book."

"She has impeccable taste in people," Tommy agrees, and Ranboo makes an uneasy noise, popping open the tab on his Fanta. He can't believe Ranboo doesn't like him. Well, his alter ego, but it might as well be the same as Ranboo dancing on his grave. Alright, maybe not *that* severe, but Tommy's pride is not to be wounded, dammit. "What've you got against this guy anyway, boob boy? I mean, I'm pretty neutral on the whole thing, but even *I* have to admit, he seems kinda cool so far."

Ranboo just shakes his head, making a face as he takes the lettuce out of his sandwich and hands it to Tubbo, who eats it like a crisp. "This whole thing just makes me very uneasy. I mean, yeah, he did a couple good deeds yesterday, but who's to say he's not going to earn the city's trust and then, like, destroy it?" Ranboo says, making vague gestures with his hands that somewhat resemble crimes.

Tommy hadn't even considered *that*. He supposes he could, but that

would ruin the whole idea of being a hero, just like he'd said to Niki. Tubbo is shaking his head. "No. No, Ranboo, you're so wrong it's almost funny. I say almost, because *fuck* you, Spider-Man is cool as hell. Matter of fact," Tubbo says, unlocking his phone and opening up Twitter, which can't be good, "I'm going to single-handedly start a Spider-Man subtwitter, just to spite you."

Positively cackling, Tommy leans over and slaps the table as Ranboo groans. Tubbo waves the phone in his face-probably a brand new Twitter profile-and grins, leaning back in his chair after a moment. "You're a menace to society," Ranboo says flatly, and Tubbo snickers. "For real, though, don't make a stan account dedicated to the guy, it's gonna get you targeted by criminals or something, man."

"And Spider-Man would save me," Tubbo says, completely confident, and yeah, Tommy absolutely would. Though he hopes it won't happen. Tubbo starts tapping away at his phone, and Tommy chugs the rest of his Coke. "You know, Spider-Man would probably save you too, even though you hate him."

"Wh-! I don't *hate* him! I just think you're putting too much stock in a guy who literally helped two people yesterday and disappeared," Ranboo says, sounding a little more firm in his opinion this time. Tommy thinks that's fair; after all, the public doesn't know it's him. If they did, Ranboo would probably be singing Tommy's praises right about now, because Tommy is simply the coolest. Ranboo shakes his head. "At least Tommy's got some sense. I'm glad you're not hopping on the bandwagon, unlike *some* people."

Shaking his head, Tommy takes a bite out of his sandwich. "Don't look at me, I'm not shielding you from Tubbo's wrath. Mans got a sense of self-preservation," he says, and Ranboo sighs as Tubbo steals a sweet from him and continues to tap away. "I might be neutral on it, but I *do* think you're being a bit overly-cautious, big man."

Ranboo gestures widely and frantically, eyes the size of dinner plates. "The guy's got freaking superpowers, how are you *not* being cautious?!" he asks, and Tommy thinks that this is one of the few times he's ever been able to describe someone as flabbergasted.

Tubbo just waves dismissively, and Ranboo's practically having a conniption now. "Are you serious?! You're telling me you guys are just, what-you're fine with some vigilante roaming the streets?"

"I'm not just fine with it, I'm *ecstatic* about it. I wonder if he'd commission me for tech if I offered," Tubbo ponders, and Tommy actually considers it for a minute. But no, that'd just put Tubbo in danger, and that's kind of the opposite of what Tommy's going for. Tubbo turns to Ranboo, the teasing grin now gone from his face. "Are you actually not excited about it? He's something straight out of a comic book, Ranboo, you've got to be a *little* intrigued."

Sighing, Ranboo downs the last few drops of his soda and sets the empty can down. "Can we just drop this? I don't want to argue with you," he says, and Tubbo frowns, conceding nonetheless and returning his phone to his pocket. Shoulders slumping in relief, Ranboo turns back to Tommy and tilts his head. "Hey, how'd that one biology project end up going? The one you needed the fabric for, the stuff from Puffy's."

Ah, shit. "Uh, it went really great! It was a piece of cake, actually, super easy, I nailed it. Got perfect marks and everything," Tommy lies, hating the way it comes so easily to him. He should probably change the subject, or at least shift it so that the others don't start asking too many questions. "How did your Spanish test go, Tubbo?"

"Bueno," Tubbo says, and the only reason Tommy knows that it'd been what he'd said is because Tubbo shoots him a thumbs-up. The word itself has been horrifically butchered. "Big Q's tutoring is really paying off, don't you think?"

Ranboo pats his shoulder. "Sure it is, buddy," he says, "sure it is."

Tommy snickers, and he goes to check his phone, surprised when he sees a good few notifications from Twitter. He glares up at Tubbo when he realizes it's all message requests from Tubbo's new account, and Tubbo beams at him. Tommy blocks the account. He goes to check his messages, then, surprised to see a couple from Wilbur. They'd gotten over the whole *Les Mis* debacle-that's what Tommy had taken to calling it, at least-but Wilbur's been home a lot more often lately, so they haven't really had a need to text each

other.

Tommy!!!!!!

The Spider-Man saved Eret!!!!

who?? lmao

Of course, he knows exactly who Eret is, but how the hell does Wilbur know them?

Dude. You've met Eret. They live down the street from us!!

well excuuuuuse me for not being nosy about the neighbors

I hate you.

But we might get to meet the Spider-Man if he sticks around our neighborhood!!!!

why the fuck are u calling him THE spider-man he's just spider-man

Eat glass.

fuck off and die

Do you still need a ride home?

don't die then ig fuck u

That's what I thought.

Tommy grins, shoving his phone into the pocket of his hoodie and turning his attention back to Ranboo and Tubbo. He's immediately caught off-guard by them both furiously tapping on their phones and glaring at each other every so often. Thankfully, Tommy can tell it's all in good fun, but he's still slightly concerned. Even their joking fights can get a little intense.

"If you can make a stan account, I can make an anti account! It's only fair!" Ranboo says, clearly in protest to whatever Tommy's tuned out. He's been getting much better at ignoring people's conversations lately; it works wonders in the hallways.

"I'm telling all of my very cool new followers to block and report you immediately," Tubbo grumbles, and Tommy's eyes flit back and forth between the two of them.

"What in the *fuck* did I miss?" he asks. Both of them snap their heads up eerily simultaneously.

"Unblock me!"

"No, don't unblock him, follow my 'citizens against Spider-Man' account!"

Oh no.

Diversity win! The person you just saved from getting robbed is bisexual and uses all pronouns!

ouch!

Chapter 6: ouch!

Thing this chapter contains: a bullet wound and a typical family dinner

CW for slight gore!!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Things are not going well.

They *had* been going pretty decently-Tommy's never stopped a store robbery before, but it had been turning out to be a total breeze-until, of course, some fucker with a knife had decided that he's suddenly out for Tommy's blood. Tommy much prefers his blood *inside* his body, thank you. The poor store clerk being held up, a bald guy that's kind of been mouthing off to the robbers since Tommy had gotten here, pales immensely at the sight of the knife glinting under the fluorescent lights, and Tommy narrows his eyes at the guy holding it.

He's a tall dude, a little shorter than Tommy, but more solidly built. This is going to be a pain, possibly literally. He shoots a web off and it latches to the guy's wrist, the one holding the knife, and Tommy tugs, trying to disarm him. Unfortunately, the guy catches the knife with his other hand and charges, and Tommy throws his arms up in front of his face to block it; the blade slashes his forearms and he hisses in pain, aiming a kick at the robber's stomach.

The robber stumbles back, and Tommy webs his hand-and the knife-to the counter, and the clerk jumps back, eyes wide. "C'mon, buddy, you're not gonna win this," Tommy warns him, and the robber scoffs, clearly panicked as he tries to pull his hand out of the webs. That shit's gonna *stick*. For a while. Tommy looks towards the store clerk. "Mate, you wanna call the cops?"

"Fuck, yeah, you're right, Mr. Spider-Guy-Man," the clerk says, stumbling to the store phone, and Tommy turns back to the robber. He webs up the guy's hand a little more and flips him off when he tries to lunge forward and grab Tommy. The clerk keeps looking between the two of them, still all nerves. "Uh, yes, I-I was being robbed, the guy's still here, Spider-Dude webbed him up. Can you-? Okay, yeah, thank you, it's just-yes, the deli on Main Street. Thanks."

"They on their way?" Tommy asks, and the clerk nods, that same astonished look on his face. He starts to go, but the clerk stops him, eyeing his arms. Tommy ignores the pulsating pain and waves dismissively. "I'll be alright, superpowers n' all that. You gonna be okay with him 'til the cops get here?"

Wordlessly, the clerk nods, and Tommy heads back out of the store and swings up and away. He grimaces at the blood starting to stain his bodysuit-that's gonna be a pain to get out. A few people on the ground take pictures, which he's gotten used to, and Tommy grimaces as he hears someone crying out for help a few blocks over. There's nothing better than swinging around the city, in Tommy's opinion, but the excitement of it is dampened when there's a civilian in danger.

As he lands, something solid and heavy hits his shoulder, and Tommy looks down the barrel of a pistol as he lifts his head. For a minute, the man with the gun just *looks* at him, eyes wide, and Tommy decides to take a look at his shoulder. There's a hole there now. "Fuck," the guy says, hand with the gun shaking. "You're the-"

"You *shot* me," Tommy says, blinking, and the woman he'd leapt in front of takes off running down the alleyway. The guy with the gun seems to snap out of whatever stupor he'd been in, and Tommy's adrenaline starts pumping as The Sense warns him of an incoming

bullet. Thankfully, he's able to dodge this one, and he punches the guy in the jaw; maybe he should be more careful, but this guy definitely deserves a concussion. "Stupid bastard. Have fun in jail, you trigger-happy bitch!"

He webs the guy's face, because seriously, *fuck* this guy, and sticks him to the wall of the alleyway, taking the obviously stolen purse from him and walking back out of the alley. He taps the woman on the shoulder, and she jumps, relaxing slightly when she sees it's him. "Oh, thank you, Spider-Man," she says as Tommy hands her the purse, and she gasps at the sluggish blood staining his arms and his shoulder. "My goodness, your shoulder! Are you-?!"

"I'm fine, miss, don't worry," Tommy says, though he very much *is not*. He's gotten punched and kicked, nothing that leaves more than bruises or scrapes; he's never been fucking shot. The adrenaline is still going strong, so Tommy barely feels more than a low thrum of pain. "Thanks for calling the authorities. That guy's not going anywhere anytime soon, rest assured."

The woman gnaws at her bottom lip, clearly worried. Tommy's got to get going, though, he's got maths homework and a chapter of *Les Mis* to read. He fires off a web, and the woman calls out after him. "Hydrogen peroxide can help you get bloodstains out of your suit, Spider-Man!" she shouts, and he turns in mid-air to give her a thumbs up before swinging out of the central part of the city and dipping into an alley closer to his house.

He can get changed and walk from here; he's stored a duffle bag with a change of clothes in this alley, just in case something like this happens. Tommy's not one to plan ahead, but he figures it definitely can't hurt when it comes to his alter ego. Wincing, Tommy peels off the bodysuit, careful not to tear up too much skin around his wounds and gagging at the sight of the *hole in his fucking arm, holy shit*. He tosses on the sweatshirt and pulls on the joggers from the duffel bag, stuffing his supersuit into it instead and slinging it over his uninjured shoulder.

Tommy's going to have to be careful about this. If he tips off Phil accidentally, he's going to be in a shitload of trouble. So he slips in through the back door, jumping up to crawl silently on the ceiling

past Phil's home office and up the stairs, only dropping back down once he's closed his bedroom door behind him. Tommy sets the duffel bag down on his bed and digs through his closet. Alas, his first aid kit is missing.

The only person in the house who would've taken it is Techno, unfortunately, which means Tommy's going to have to convince him. He knocks on Techno's door with his good arm, and he's met face-to-face with a bush of pink hair. Techno has clearly only just woken up. "What the hell do you want?" Techno asks, voice gravelly, and Tommy grins.

"Ah, my favorite brother!" he says, and Techno raises an eyebrow at him. Alright, so flattery isn't going to work. Tommy lifts his sleeve up just barely, only enough to show the edge of the dried blood peeking out from it. "See, Techno, I've injured myself-took quite the spill on my walk home, y'see-and so I'm gonna need my first aid kit back. Please."

Blinking, Techno closes the door in his face. Tommy squawks, but he hears rustling coming from inside Techno's bedroom, along with a few telltale clangs of swords being thrown out of the way, and then Techno's shoving the first aid kit into his arms, shooing him from the doorway. "I'm going back to bed. Don't wake me up until Phil makes something for dinner," Techno says, and the door slams shut again.

That was easy.

Tommy locks himself in the bathroom and whips the sweatshirt over his head, wincing as the adrenaline peters out and the pain comes rushing in. He sets the first aid kit on the counter and grabs a black washcloth-thank God for Wilbur's emo phase-to put under warm water. Tommy rubs the washcloth gently over the gashes left by the knife on his right arm, putting a little more pressure on it as he gets to the drier spots. The wound begins to ooze blood again, and Tommy wraps his forearm in a few layers of gauze, securing it with medical tape.

He does the same on his left side, being careful not to jostle his arm around too much, lest he further lodge the bullet into his shoulder. Tommy had tested out his regeneration abilities the other day when

he'd gotten a paper cut; it had been like nothing had happened not even two minutes later. The sight of his wounds today still makes him uneasy, and they'll probably take much longer to heal, even *with* the heightened regeneration.

Now all that's left is the bullet. *Fuck*. Tommy grabs the pair of surgical tweezers from the first aid kit and sets them aside, rubbing the washcloth as gingerly as possible over the general area of the wound. Then, he sticks the washcloth between his teeth and braces himself. Shuddering as the tweezers *clink* against the metal of the bullet, The Sense warns him whenever he needs to keep the tweezers on the right track, so as to not damage his nerves.

Tommy bites down so hard on the still-damp washcloth that pink water drips down his chin and dampens his collarbones. The bullet feels like hell incarnate coming out, and Tommy lets out a pained grunt as he slowly brings it out of his arm. It's about halfway out when Tommy loses his grip on it with the tweezers, and he curses, muffled around the washcloth. His breathing is labored, face twisted up in pain, and he nearly gags as he *feels* the fibers of his muscles start to stitch themselves back together. At least his body's got the sense not to try and regenerate cells where the bullet's still lodged in his arm.

Tommy wipes the tweezers on the washcloth, making a face when his trembling hand makes the bloodied tip brush against the corner of his mouth. He returns to his efforts with the bullet, clenching his left hand in a fist as he starts to pull the bullet out further. He's not about to risk shattering the bathroom countertop by gripping it too hard; that'd probably be just as hard to explain away as the bullet would be.

A choked noise escapes from the very back of his throat as the bullet finally comes out with a squelching, stringy *pop* of a noise, and Tommy gags at the viscera dripping from the metal tip of it. Tossing both the bullet and the tweezers in the sink, Tommy takes the washcloth from his mouth and runs it under the water again, wiping away the sluggish blood that's started to drip from the open wound. He's not exactly an expert on medical stitches, and he's not about to risk an infection, either, so Tommy grabs the peroxide from the medical cupboard, pours some on the washcloth, and hopes.

Fuck, it stings. It stings so bad that Tommy's eyes well up with tears that spill over immediately, and he gasps, punching down on his thigh so hard it'll probably bruise. Tommy wipes once more, and he feels himself go pale at the sight of the wound. Not only can he still feel his body regenerating cells, but he can *see* muscle fibers stitching themselves back together. Mumbling curses under his breath, Tommy grabs the gauze again and starts wrapping it around his shoulder, shaky breathing being the only sound other than the brief rip of tape.

And then there's a knock on the door. "Tommy? Are you in there? Hurry the hell up, I've gotta take a piss, man," Wilbur's voice sounds from the other side of the door, and Tommy groans, rinsing off the bullet and the tweezers before shoving them, the gauze, and the medical tape back into the first aid kit. He scrubs at the vaguely stained parts of the sink with some more hydrogen peroxide-thank you, lady from earlier-and tosses the washcloth in the hamper. "The fuck are you even *doing* in there, Toms?"

Shoving his sweatshirt back over his head and only minorly wincing at the pain, Tommy throws the door open and glares at Wilbur, first aid kit under his arm. "None of your business, bitch," he says easily, and he reaches up to flick Wilbur's forehead. "Now move, I'm going to my room and I can't if you're in the way, sand boy."

"I try to eat sand *once* when I'm eleven and I never get to live it down," Wilbur grumbles, but he steps out of the way anyway, making a face as Tommy passes him. The expression turns to confusion, and then recognition; Tommy feels stricken, but Wilbur doesn't seem concerned or worried for the moment, so it's probably nothing to worry about. "You smell like fireworks. Why d'you smell like fireworks?"

Tommy wracks his brain for an excuse, and his brain promptly decides to plagiarize a story Tubbo had told him and Ranboo during lunch. "I was at the skatepark, some kids were doing this thing with sparklers that, like... pop? Like these little spark popper thingies, got gunpowder all over my fuckin' shirt," Tommy says, and Wilbur nods, though his brows are furrowed now.

"Stay away from that skatepark, there's always a bunch of assholes

over by there,” Wilbur tells him, and Tommy’s probably not going to the skatepark anytime soon regardless, so he just nods . Wilbur flips him off. “Get outta here, let me piss in peace, gremlin child.”

Returning the gesture as he turns and heads back to his room, Tommy panics at the heavy clinking of the bullet in the first aid kit. But Wilbur doesn’t seem to notice anything’s wrong as he closes the bathroom door, and nobody comes running out to demand answers from him, so Tommy’s fairly certain he’s in the clear. He tucks the first aid kit back into his closet and settles down at his desk.

He’s still got homework to do, after all.

When Tommy comes downstairs for dinner, Wilbur, Phil, and Techno are already seated in the dining room, Phil’s phone propped up against the chair at the head of the table. Absolutely lighting up, Tommy rushes over and waves into the camera, and a delighted laugh fills the room as he does. “There he is! How’s my favorite little crime boy?” Kristin coos, and Tommy grins, shooting her a thumbs-up. She grins, and Phil nudges Tommy’s shoulder to try and get him to sit down, but Tommy swats him away. Kristin gives him an apologetic smile on the screen, leaning her chin against her palm. “Sorry I’ve missed the last few weeks of dinners, I was just telling everyone that things have been really hectic here. I usually don’t even get to call Phil until it’s, like, three in the morning your time.”

“Don’t worry about it, you’re here today! How’ve you been? How’s-which state are you in again? New York?” he asks, and Kristin nods. Tommy actually *does* sit down then, because he’s blocking Techno’s view of the phone, and he doesn’t exactly want to hear Techno recite *The Art of War* at him for an hour as revenge again.

“It’s been really nice! I’m bringing you boys souvenirs, by the way, they’ve got tons of this one candy that I really think you’ll like, Toms,” Kristin tells them, and Phil puts his head in his hands and groans. Her twinkly laugh fills the room again, and Wilbur pats Phil’s shoulder sympathetically as Techno takes a massive bite of his bread. “I’ve also got a bag filled *specifically* with only brown M&Ms for Wil from the M&M store, and yes, Techno, I got you an authentic

antique cutlass from the store you sent me the address to.”

Techno nearly chokes on his bread, eyes wide. “Wait, seriously?” he asks, and Kristin nods with a bright smile. Techno leans forward, and Wilbur grabs the water pitcher. “Oh my God, thank you so much, I didn’t actually think you’d-well, no, you’ve always delivered on presents, dunno why I’m surprised.”

“Of course! And don’t worry, Phil, I’ve got some of that stuff you asked me to get for the garden, but it’s gonna be a pain in the ass to get it through customs,” she says, rolling her eyes, and Phil blows her a kiss. Everyone else, including Tommy, makes a face. Kristin points her butterknife at the camera and waggles it around menacingly. “Just you wait, kiddos, it’s gonna be so much worse when I’m finally back home. Oh! I almost forgot! Phil, have you signed Tommy up for driver’s ed?”

Phil crosses his arms and raises a brow. “And have him crash my car? No, that can wait until you get home, love,” he says, and Wilbur snickers. Tommy kicks him under the table. Kristin shakes her head, but she shrugs anyway. Damn. Well, it’s not as though Tommy even needs to be able to drive now, anyway; he can just swing to get wherever he needs to go. Phil goes to take a bite of his carrots-Tommy frowns at what’s on his own plate, there’s barely any protein-but he pauses, vaguely waving the carrot in the phone’s direction. “By the way, has news of it reached the States yet? We’ve got some guy in a mask running around-”

“There’s a *superhero* in London, Kristin!” Wilbur interrupts, suddenly far more excited and invested in the conversation than he’d just been. Techno rolls his eyes and tilts his head back, his silent way of saying *here we go again*, and Wilbur smacks his hand on the table. “No! Fuck you, Tech, this is the first time something interesting’s happened other than me occasionally getting two packs of crisps from the staff room vending machine! Kristin, Mum, Mumza, there’s an actual fucking *superhero* in London fighting crime, it’s insane!”

Kristin blinks, clearly surprised. “Is there really?” she asks, and Phil just shrugs. Kristin raises a brow and Tommy straightens up. He’s been quiet about this whole thing, he knows it, and he’s not surprised in the least bit when she calls him out on it. Kristin’s

always observant. "You're awfully quiet, Toms, I thought you'd be just as excited as Wil about a superhero."

"No, I am! I am, I just-Ranboo made some really good points about the guy a while ago, I'm just being cautious, s'the responsible thing to do, not like *Wilbur* would know anything about that," Tommy says, and Wilbur flips him off. Tommy flicks a carrot at him, and Wilbur throws a chunk of bread at him. The Sense warns him fast enough to dodge it, thankfully. "Mumza! Wil's being a bitch!"

Phil buries his head in his hands and Techno takes a long sip of water as Kristin laughs. "Boys, *behave*, you're gonna give my poor old husband a heart attack," she says, and Phil looks up at the phone flatly. Kristin just laughs again, putting her hands up in a mock-placating kind of way, and Tommy kicks at Wilbur under the table again.

Techno sighs as Wilbur grabs his glass of water and goes to toss it at Tommy, but Phil gives him a glare so harsh that Tommy feels like *he's* the one getting it just by proximity. Techno reaches under the table for something. "I'm not *that* old," Phil says, "I'm still young enough to put up with your bullshit, boys. Techno! How many times do I have to tell you, *no swords at the dinner table!*"

Glaring at Phil, Techno sets the sword back down, and Tommy cackles in unison with Kristin, who's laughing so hard she's peaking the microphone. "Don't laugh! He was going to stab me, this is favoritism at its finest!" Wilbur shrieks, and Phil shoves the back of his head lightly.

"I wasn't gonna *stab* you," Techno says, clearly amused. He makes a quick gesture, like he's just lightly slicing something, and Tommy doubled over laughing again as Wilbur sputters a bunch of incoherent syllables, looking from Phil, to the phone propped up against the chair, and to Techno again. "Wil, I was just gonna *lightly* terrorize you."

Kristin's still giggling, and Tommy finally settles down. He's glad, in a way, that the most interesting topic of discussion at his family dinner table isn't his alter ego. "Alright, enough talk about stabbing, how's school going for the three of you?" Kristin asks, and Tommy stuffs

his face with his dinner so he doesn't have to answer. Alas, she catches this immediately. "Don't think we won't circle back to you, Tommy."

He makes a face, and Wilbur rubs his hands together with a grin. Bastard. "Oh, Mumza, I can tell you *all* about how Tommy's doing in my class," he says, and Tommy's half-tempted to give up the secret identity schtick to web Wilbur's mouth shut. Unfortunately, he cares about saving people and making the city a better place and all that, so he keeps his wrists to himself. "See, we're about to finish up *Les Mis*, and Tommy's been slacking-yes, dipshit, I can tell you've only been going off of SparkNotes-so I've decided to make the test written-response only, but just for him."

"That's illegal! It's gotta be illegal or some shit, Wilbur, *fuck* you," Tommy says, slamming his hands on the table, and Techno chuckles. Tommy whirls on him, finger pointed right at his stupid face. "Oh, don't you even start, Mr. 'I stained the bathtub pink again,' learn to fucking clean the stains out the tub before you-!"

"I want it on record that I haven't dyed my hair since last month," Techno speaks over him, and Wilbur's sitting there laughing his head off. Tommy stabs another piece of carrot with his fork and waves it threateningly. "Tommy, put that down before you hurt yourself."

"How would he hurt himself with a *carrot*, Tech?" Phil asks, head now back in his hands.

Wilbur snorts. "You'd be surprised, he smacked himself in the face with his locker the other day," he says, and Tommy goes bright red with what definitely *is not* embarrassment, fuck you, *Wilbur*. Just because he'd been too tired to listen to The Sense that day doesn't mean Wilbur can just go around telling everyone.

Kristin clicks her tongue sympathetically. "Aww, poor Toms," she says, and Tommy flips Wilbur off out of the frame as he sends the camera a very pitiful look. Kristin's definitely not falling for it, but he can tell she's gonna lean into the bit anyway. "Wilbur, be kind to your brother, that must've been very traumatic for him."

Techno hides a laugh behind his hand as Wilbur starts to protest, but Phil stabs his napkin onto his fork and starts waving it around like a flag before Wilbur can get anything out. "I'm literally begging all of you to let me have one normal family dinner," he says.

"Alright, alright, let's settle down for the sake of the old man's health," Techno says, and Phil slams the fork down, completely unamused. Techno pays no mind to this, and Tommy watches, grinning, as Techno turns back to the phone. "So you said New York's been good?"

"Yeah, the city's crowded, as usual, but I've been having a really good time whenever I'm not working," Kristin says, and Tommy's honestly glad to hear that. It sucks whenever she's away, but he's glad she's doing well. "I've been doing whatever tourist stuff I didn't get to do the last time I was here-Times Square, stuff like that. How are you guys doing? How're your fencing tournaments going, Tech?"

Techno takes a long sip of water. "Won my last one, trophy's up on my shelf," he says, and Kristin claps, clearly proud. Tommy smiles gently and eats some more dinner. It's not seasoned well-Phil's cooking isn't great, but he'll take it over Wil's any day-but it's still pretty flavorful, thanks to his enhanced taste buds. "Hey, Kristin, you should ask Wilbur about *Sally*."

Wilbur goes bright red, and Tommy is suddenly *much* more interested in the conversation, leaning forward as Wilbur very clearly kicks at and misses Techno's shins. "Shut the fuck up," he hisses as Kristin gasps and Phil raises a questioning eyebrow at him.

"Who's *Sally*?" Phil asks, using the same teasing tone as Techno when saying the name, and Wilbur groans, head in his hands. Tommy wracks his brain, trying to think of a teacher or faculty member, considering Wilbur's got basically no social life outside of his co-workers.

The name comes to him suddenly, and Tommy's jaw drops, Wilbur immediately threatening him under his breath. "You've got a thing for Ms. *Saumon*?!" Tommy demands, pointing an accusatory finger at Wilbur, and The Sense warns him about the next chunk of bread that's thrown his way. Phil and Kristin give him a simultaneous

questioning hum-gross, they're so in sync-and Tommy pointedly ignores Wilbur's glare. "She's the new gym instructor, she's got biceps the size of my *head*."

Techno looks vaguely impressed. Phil's stifling a laugh as Wilbur gets ever-closer to the shade of a tomato, and Kristin coos. "Wil, that's so exciting! Have you asked her out yet?" she asks, and Wilbur sinks down in his seat. Tommy cackles.

"Shut up, Tommy," Wilbur grumbles, pushing his chicken around on his plate. "I hate all of you, for the record."

"Wilbur hasn't talked to her *once*," Tommy tells Kristin, and her shoulders shake with suppressed laughter. Phil stops bothering to bury his own, and Techno's got a smug grin on his face as Wilbur throws more bread at Tommy. "Quite sad, actually, Wil, you oughta learn a thing or two from me, women *love* me."

"I've talked to her before!" Wilbur protests, high-pitched and clearly mortified, and Techno gives him a skeptical look. "No, no, *fuck you*, Techno, I told you about this! I talked to her, I said hi to her literally the other day!"

"That's not talking to her, mate," Phil points out. Wilbur groans, hands scrubbing over his face, and Tommy innocently returns to his meal. Techno starts to say something, but Phil shoots him a warning look. "Let's leave it be for now, but I fully expect to know when your wedding's gonna be, Wilbur."

"I hate this fucking family," Wilbur huffs, and Kristin bursts out laughing.

"No you don't," she says easily, smile ever-present on her face.

Wilbur sighs. "No, I don't."

As Tommy's finishing up the dishes, Phil comes into the kitchen, phone still in hand, Kristin's voice still coming from the speakers. "Hello, parental figures," he greets, only half-paying attention as he dries his hands. Phil nods at him and turns back to the phone,

looking positively lovestruck. Disgusting. Tommy makes a face and flicks a bit of water at Phil. "Let me know when you're done being gross."

"Relax, I was just about to hand you the phone anyway," Phil says, and Tommy sticks his tongue out at him. Phil just shakes his head and passes Tommy the phone. "Come give it back when you're done, Wil and Techno have already had a chance to talk to her since they're not the ones on dish duty."

Tommy grumbles a few curses under his breath but takes the phone anyway, noting with some amount of dread that Phil's left him alone in the kitchen. "Hey, Toms," Kristin says, and Tommy gets the sinking feeling that both she and Phil are expecting him to 'talk about it' now. Oh, *fuck*, how's he supposed to get out of this? "How've you been, bud?"

"I've been fine. Stressed over school, but that's nothing new," Tommy says, and Kristin hums sympathetically. He doesn't really know what to say; clearly, she's expecting him to spearhead the conversation, and yeah, Tommy misses her quite a bit and he's very happy to talk to her, but he doesn't really know how to do that seriously. Tommy just says the first thing that comes to mind-not that he wouldn't have ordinarily. "So, uh, those American baseball teams. New York's got one?"

Kristin bursts out laughing. "Yeah, man, they've got *two*. I'm not going to baseball games, though, I'd get bored so quick," she says, and then she coughs. It's awkward. "So, um... Phil told me you've been having some problems lately, and that you wouldn't talk to anyone but me about them, and when I mentioned that to Techno, he said that you-"

"No! I'm not-! No, Christ, Kristin, that's not-absolutely just... no. I just said some bullshit to Techno so he'd stop bothering me," Tommy says quickly, and Kristin's whole body-well, the bit that Tommy can see in the frame anyway-relaxes. It's clearly a relief.

"Okay, thank God, that was going to be the *worst*," she laughs, and Tommy laughs too. It's much easier talking about pretty much anything with someone who hasn't been around to witness the

fuckups he's been making. "So what's got you down, then, kiddo? How can I be of service?"

Tommy wonders if he should tell her. After all, she wouldn't go telling Phil if he asks her to hide it, and it'd probably put her in close to no danger, given she's across an ocean pretty often. But no, he really shouldn't take his chances. "Just... school stuff. It's dumb. Honestly, it's nothing to worry about," he settles on, and Kristin frowns, but she doesn't pry. "Uh, I guess I should give you back to Phil now so you guys can get back to being gross and married and all that. Miss you."

"I miss you too, kid. We'll talk more about it when I'm home," she says, a soft smile on her face, and Tommy pretends to be annoyed when she makes a little heart with her hands. "C'mon, Toms, you know you wanna."

"I *can't*, I'm holding the phone," Tommy chuckles, heading down the hall towards Phil's home office. He knocks on the door and Phil calls for him to come in, and Tommy promptly hands the phone back. "Kristin says she's going to leave you and take us to New York with her. Goodbye, father. T'was nice knowing you."

Kristin scoffs. "As if I can take you *anywhere*, Tommy. You haven't known how to act in public *ever*," she jokes, and Tommy flips off the camera from over Phil's shoulder.

"Leave my office, please," Phil says, nudging Tommy towards the door. He flips off the phone one last time and skitters out to the hall, hearing Phil call after him. "And quit cyber-bullying my wife, dammit!"

"Your wife is going to leave you!" Tommy shouts, already halfway up the stairs.

"Kristin's leaving Phil?" Wilbur asks curiously, and Tommy nods. Wilbur hums. "Good. She's too good for him."

"I can fuckin' hear you lot!" Phil shouts from downstairs, and Tommy gives Wilbur a fist bump.

"We know!" Tommy yells back. "Tell Kristin she can do better!"

"Tell her I know at least six other dads that make more money than you!" Wilbur joins in.

"Tell Kristin I said goodnight, and ask her if she can make the three of you shut up," Techno grumbles from his doorway, and Tommy and Wilbur look over at him at the same time, both stifling a laugh at his pink pyjamas and matching bunny slippers. Techno eyes them warily. "This is my orphan murdering outfit, y'know."

Tommy shakes his head. "It's seven in the evening, Tech. You're such a crotchety old man," he says, and Techno throws a slipper at him. The Sense decides to stay quiet for that one, bitch that it is, and Tommy squawks, dashing into his room. He can hear Techno and Wilbur laughing at him from the hall. Bitches.

Tommy smiles.

banging my fists against a table BUFF SALLY BUFF SALLY BUFF SALLY

we didn't start the fire

Chapter 7: we didn't start the fire

Tubbo becomes an amateur reporter, Tommy argues with a cop, and a cat is saved.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Tubbo's stan account is getting out of hand.

He waves his phone in Tommy's face, clearly ecstatic, as Tommy gets the last of his things out of his locker. "Look! Thirty *thousand* followers already, and I've only had it for a few weeks! The people just love Spider-Man," Tubbo says, aiming the last bit at Ranboo, who shakes his head and returns to his own locker. Tommy just raises a brow at Tubbo, and Tubbo continues, tapping away at his phone. "D'you think I could turn it into an update account? Like, I could try and follow any Spider-Man encounters and update the people."

"The people?" Ranboo questions, slightly amused, though Tommy's anything but. Tubbo can't go running into every fight Tommy gets into; he'd get himself hurt, or *killed*. Tubbo nods eagerly and taps away, probably responding to some other account dedicated to Spider-Man. Tommy's seen a lot of those cropping up lately. Ranboo sighs. "Y'know, I still don't trust him. I trust him more than I did on day one, sure, but... I dunno, something about his vibe is off."

"Are you saying London's one and only superhero has *bad vibes*?" Tubbo asks, positively bewildered, and Tommy silently panics as his hand gets stuck to a textbook. Son of a bitch, he'd thought he'd gotten this under control. Tubbo scoffs at Ranboo and goes back to his typing. "Well, regardless, I'm still gonna try and keep up with

what Spider-Man's doing more accurately. I can only repost so many blurry photos of the guy."

Tommy fills his thoughts with Henry's little cow face and the book clatters inside his locker, both his friends turning to him with questioning looks. "Sorry, fellas, dropped my textbook," he says with a sheepish grin, and they just shrug. "To be honest, though, Tubbo, I don't think it's a good idea to go following this guy into fights."

Ranboo quickly nods in agreement. "Tommy's right, it would be ridiculously irresponsible to dash into fights for what, a picture or two?" he says, tone gentle but firm, and Tubbo just groans, pretending to slam his head into Tommy's locker. "C'mon, dude, you can't actually think that you're gonna be doing anything but putting yourself in danger."

Still not convinced, Tubbo crosses his arms. "Spider-Man would save me," he says, and Tommy resists the urge to *actually* slam his head into the locker, on purpose this time, because Tubbo's absolutely right. It's not even a question; there's not a single situation where Tommy wouldn't prioritize Tubbo's safety if he were to get into the middle of a Spider-Man fight. Ranboo starts to protest, but Tubbo pokes a finger into his chest. "No, no, I'm right and you know it! Have you not been watching the news? He saves *everyone*! It's what he *does*, Ranboo."

Now that Tommy and Ranboo have both collected their things, the three of them start heading towards the exit. "I'm just saying you can't trust him to put your safety in front of, like, a basket full of puppies about to get crushed by a building or something," Ranboo says, and Tommy cackles, shouldering the doors open.

"Even / wouldn't put my safety before the puppies, Ranboo, are you crazy?" Tubbo laughs, and Ranboo sighs from deep in his soul. Tommy laughs quietly, even though this line of conversation is making him anxious as hell. Tubbo kicks at Ranboo's ankles, and Ranboo deftly dodges. "You *do* realize that I'd be staying back as much as I can, right? I'm not gonna jump in front of a knife or anything, you can stop being so bitchy about it. Plus, I'm setting up crime alert notifications so that I can know where Spider-Man might be, so I'm already basically doing this."

Oh. That might have been a good thing to do. Tommy just patrols the city, but having crime alerts would probably be a lot more efficient, especially for crimes and civilians in need during the school day. "Add them to mine, too, so I can come get you if you do something stupid," he says, and it's not *technically* a lie. Tubbo takes his phone and starts tapping away.

Ranboo glares at him. "Are you seriously encouraging this, man? Both of you could get seriously hurt," he huffs, and Tommy just shrugs. Not like he hasn't been shot or stabbed before. Of course, Ranboo doesn't know that, and he starts sputtering, but they're quickly coming up on the intersection where the three of them split into different directions, so as Tubbo hands Tommy his phone back, Ranboo puts a hand on Tubbo's shoulder. "Just... promise me you'll be careful, alright? Both of you."

The two of them nod, and Tubbo heads off to the left while Ranboo heads off to the right, and Tommy continues straight on towards his house. Or, more precisely, towards the alleyway where his duffel bag's been stashed and kept safe for the past few weeks. He should probably check out the skatepark Wilbur had mentioned a while ago, just in case the crime rate is still skyrocketing over there. As Tommy pulls the hoodie on over his bodysuit, he freezes.

That smells like smoke.

Distant smoke, but smoke nonetheless. Like, the Wilbur-is-attempting-to-make-waffles kind of smoke. Tommy can smell it, though, which means it's probably somewhere within a couple of blocks. Shit. That's really close. While Tommy can't exactly put out a fire, he *can* get anyone trapped inside out, and as he swings closer to the source of the smell, he can spot it from where he swings above the skyline.

A massive apartment building is on fire. Shit. *Shit*. Tommy can safely bet that a bunch of people are going to be out, given that the workday isn't over yet, but that doesn't discount the possibility of students being stuck in there. He puts out what he can and makes a pathway into the first window he sees. Glancing around the room, he doesn't see anyone, so he ducks back out and sticks to the side of the building, crawling towards windows, wincing at the heat against

his hands, and peeking in to see if there's anyone there.

There's a good crowd at the bottom of the building-likely the folks that had gotten out already-and Tommy waves down at them. One woman down below shrieks. "Spider-Man! Oh, thank God, my wife, our son-! They're stuck in there!" she shouts, and Tommy follows where she's pointing to the window just a few down from where he is now, and he swoops in, putting out as much of the fire in this particular room with his webs as possible.

Tommy goes to open the door, only to hiss in pain as his gloved hand comes in contact with the hot metal. He sticks a web to the handle and pulls it open that way instead; he can feel the sweat starting to bead at the nape of his neck and at his hairline. It's so fucking sweltering, he can only imagine what it's like for someone stuck in here.

Paving a path by webbing the smaller fires down, Tommy catches a soft sob from the corner, and he looks over, only to find a barely-conscious woman crouching behind an overturned coffee table, the right half of her body burned from shielding the child in her lap from the flames licking at her skin. "Ma'am! Ma'am, can you hear me?!" Tommy shouts, and she looks up at him, eyelids drooping. The child in her lap screams, probably in terror. Tommy pats out a flame that's begun to burn his sleeve. "Can you hand me your son?"

She reaches up, but she's clearly too weakened by the smoke inhalation to lift her kid up properly. Tommy curses under his breath and gets closer, adrenaline preventing him from feeling the pain of the flames slowly crawling up his leg. Shit. He reaches out for the kid, who screams again and buries his face in his now unconscious-mother's chest. "No!" the toddler cries, and Tommy starts to panic as the support beams in the kitchen start to fall. The kid pounds his fists against his mom, who's too far out of it to do much of anything. "Mummy! Scary monster, stranger danger!"

"Hey, hey, it's okay, I'm here to help you," Tommy says gently, careful not to make his voice too loud, and he coughs into his elbow as smoke filters into his lungs. He should really invest in more heavily filtered fabric. Maybe Puffy'll even give him a discount. The kid's still screeching something about him being a monster, and

there's really no time for this, so Tommy whips his mask off and smiles. The toddler falls silent, looking at him with wide eyes. "I'm a kid, just like you, see? It's just a mask. My name is Spider-Man, and I'm gonna get you and your mummy out of here, you just have to come here, okay? I don't want you guys getting more hurt."

The child reaches up for him with trembling arms, and Tommy easily scoops him up, pulling his mask back on. "No! Monster!" the kid screams, thrashing against him, and Tommy coughs into his elbow again in lieu of groaning in frustration. "G'offa me! Monster!"

"It's just me!" Tommy tells the kid, pulling his mask back up, and the kid's got that same wide-eyed look of awe on his face as they get closer to the window Tommy had gotten in through. Tommy goes to pull it down again and pauses as he does. "I'm still gonna be here, just under the mask, okay? It's a secret, just between you and me. Pinky promise you'll keep it?"

The kid's mouth opens in an 'o' of realization, and Tommy smiles despite the circumstances as a tiny pinky wraps around his own. When he pulls the mask down this time, the toddler puts his index finger to his lips. Tommy moves over to the window and ducks out from it with the kid in hand, deftly dropping to the ground and handing the kid over to his other parent.

"My wife, is-is she...?" the woman asks, voice trembling as she trails off, and Tommy shakes his head frantically.

"No, no, I'm going back for her right now, just stay there!" he calls over his shoulder as he webs himself back into the building. A flaming support beam in the room crashes down as he enters, and Tommy cries out as it strikes his shoulder. There's no time for whining, though, so he shoves it right off and weaves around the debris that'd fallen while he'd gotten the kid out. "Hey, ma'am, are you still in here? Stupid question, actually-are you awake at all?"

There's no answer. *Fuck*. Tommy dashes over to where he can barely see the overturned coffee table, and shoves the nearby debris away, cringing at the way it burns at his fingertips. The woman's still there, still unconscious, still *breathing*. Thank fucking God. He gets an arm underneath her, which is difficult, even with his

super strength, and lifts her up enough he's able to get her into a fireman's carry. Ironical, considering the fire brigade hasn't even shown their goddamn faces around here yet.

Tommy adjusts the woman a bit so that he's not putting as much strain on the shoulder the support beam had crashed into, and he starts heading back toward the window. His lungs ache with every breath, every step he takes. The regeneration thing is somewhat helping, but there's not much his superpowers can do when he's constantly inhaling smoke. Thankfully, he can hear sirens as they approach the window, and something winds around his leg.

There's a fucking cat in here.

Son of a bitch.

Ducking down just slightly, Tommy takes the trembling cat and tucks it into the pocket of his hoodie; thankfully, it's small enough to fit. Carefully climbing out of the window, taking great caution not to smack the poor lady's head against the window frame, Tommy starts to steadily climb down. It's a lot harder with a grown adult *and* a cat than with just a kid, but Tommy can still manage to get the three of them to the ground safely, handing the woman over to the paramedics and giving the cat over to the woman he'd talked to before.

"Spider-Man," a police officer shouts, grabbing his arm, and Tommy winces noiselessly-it's his injured arm. The cop actually looks mad at him, which is both totally surprising and slightly annoying. "What the hell are you thinking?! That's a *burning building*, you have to let the professionals handle this, dammit!"

"Oh, I'm sorry, did the *professionals* just save that kid?!" Tommy demands. Because, honestly, *fuck* this guy. He shoves the officer off of him-not like he can get arrested, Tommy could literally just swing the hell out of here-and crosses his arms. "Did the *professionals* rescue that poor lady?! Or did you all take your sweet fuckin' time getting here?! How long ago did you get that call, how long could it have *possibly* taken to get out here?!"

The officer looks positively murderous, unsurprisingly, and Tommy

stares right back at him, completely unimpressed. "That's no way to talk to an officer of the law, son," the officer scolds, as if Tommy's some punk telling him to go fuck himself, which, come to think of it, Tommy should definitely do soon.

"I'm not your 'son,' *officer*. Go fuck yourself," Tommy snaps, and the officer narrows his eyes, as if Tommy could give less of a fuck. "And while you're at it, maybe don't start going off on the guy who saved civilian lives, yeah? If you actually did your fuckin' job, maybe I wouldn't have to-!"

"Spider-Man!" an all-too-familiar voice shouts, and Tommy glances over his shoulder to see Tubbo jumping up and down from behind the barricade the fire brigade's put up, waving his arm as high as he can manage. With a sigh, Tommy gives the officer a gesture that's definitely not polite, and he starts to swing away, but Tubbo calls after him. "Mr. Spider-Man, sir! Can I get an interview with you?"

Tommy pauses, perched on the roof of a nearby building, and tilts his head silently down at Tubbo. He really shouldn't be encouraging this; he knows Tubbo well enough to know the bastard would head immediately into danger if it meant getting what he's aiming for. Alas, Tommy is cursed with a miniscule soft spot for his best friend, and he lets himself hang upside-down from the lip of the awning below.

Tubbo's got the stupidest expression on his face-he looks positively starstruck. "You oughta close your mouth, kid, you'll catch flies," Tommy says in his best impression of an Adult Voice, hoping desperately that Tubbo won't recognize him. "You sure you're a reporter? You look like you're twelve, mate."

"Ah, well, I'm not a reporter, per se, I'm, uh-I actually run the update account for you on Twitter, see, and I was just wondering if I, um... could I interview you, man?" Tubbo asks, looking so hopeful it's almost painful, and Tommy sighs as he nods. Tubbo visibly brightens and gets his phone out, and Tommy blinks in surprise as Tubbo's camera is very clearly aimed at him. Normally when it is, Tommy's doing something astronomically stupid. Not that this *isn't* astronomically stupid, but still. "So, Spider-Man, what was the scene like? How did you know that building was burning down? Do you

have access to police radio? What are—

“Woah, woah, slow down! One question at a time, yeah?” Tommy chuckles nervously, ever-wary of the camera in his face. “Um, no, I’ve not got police radio access, I just sorta smelled the smoke and headed over. It was a little crazy, but I had it under control...”

Tubbo nods eagerly and glances down at the phone, then back at him. “It seemed like you just got into a pretty heavy argument with that officer back there,” Tubbo says, and Tommy goes pale. Had Tubbo been *filming* that?! Jesus, Tommy’s gotta be more careful about letting his temper get the best of him. Tubbo grins eagerly. “Would you like to say what it had been about? There were lots of sirens, so I couldn’t catch exactly what you said.”

Oh, thank *fuck*. Tommy’s going to try and maintain *some* professionalism. “We had a small disagreement regarding the manner in which I handled the situation,” he says, and cringes at how fucking pretentious he sounds. Tubbo’s brows furrow in confusion, and Tommy gives up on sounding like he’s anything other than exasperated. “He told me I had no clue what I was doing, so I told him to go shove it.”

A surprised laugh bubbles out of Tubbo, and Tommy chuckles. Clearing his throat, Tubbo shifts back into what’s clearly his ‘reporter mode.’ “So, Spider-Man, a few of my followers have been wondering what your intentions are in terms of saving the city. Why do you do what you do?” he asks, and Tommy hums in thought.

“I just want to protect the city. This community’s been good to me, y’know? I’ve got people I want to keep safe, and if I make London safer for other people too, well, that’s just an added bonus,” he says with a sheepish laugh. Tubbo nods for him to go on, but Tommy doesn’t really have much more to say about it. “It’s also just... nice to be nice? I-I dunno, man, I’ve never been asked this kinda stuff before.”

Clearly pleased with Tommy’s answer, Tubbo visibly wracks his brain for another question, and he perks up, turning his phone off and putting it in his pocket. “Oh! Right! Mr. Spider-Man, sir, would you maybe need a guy to make you tech? I’ve got a pretty good

resume, I could show you my programming portfolio if you'd like, and-!"

"Hey, calm down, dude," Tommy tells him, hands up-or down, he supposes, given that he's still upside-down-by his chest, and Tubbo nods, snapping his mouth shut. "Listen, I'm sure you're a really talented kid, I just-anyone I associate with could be in potential danger. Really sorry, mate, it's just safer this way."

A little dejected, which Tommy feels *extraordinarily* guilty about, Tubbo smiles. "I understand, Spider-Man, no worries. Thanks for protecting the city," he says, so very honestly that it's absolutely gutting. Tubbo's phone beeps, making him jump and pull it out to check it again, a wince on his face. "Ah, dammit, I-I gotta go, my friends are gonna give me a ton of shit for even being here, thank you so, so much for the interview, Mr. Spider-Man!"

Tommy can barely even wave before Tubbo is taking off down the street, presumably replying to Ranboo's frantic texts.

Guess he knows what the next trending topic's gonna be.

"Tommy? I've gotta talk to you about something, open up," Phil says as he knocks on the door, and Tommy *panics*. He's midway through patching up his burns from the fire; there aren't many, but the few that he's sustained are pretty bad. Shit. Tommy hurries to finish wrapping up his calf and lets the leg of his joggers fall back over it. "Toms, I mean it. This is serious, and I'm not gonna let you say you'll talk to Kristin and then dodge the question this time."

"Right! Sorry, sorry, give me a minute!" Tommy calls back, snatching his sweatshirt from the bed. He gets stuck in it, of fucking course, and he groans, forced to think of Henry as his hands stick themselves to the inside of the sweatshirt. Tommy stumbles around, nearly tripping over the first aid kit and *definitely* causing a racket as he manages to shove the sweatshirt on properly. "You can come in now!"

"Okay, I'll preface this by saying-holy *fuck*, Tommy, you look like

shit, what the hell happened to you?!" Phil demands, taking Tommy's face in his hands. His eyes are wide and his brows are furrowed, but Tommy honestly doesn't know why he's so concerned; he'd made sure to get the soot out of his hair and wipe the grime off of his skin. "Have you been sleeping? Are you skipping meals?"

Tommy snorts. "Phil, what're you talking about? Of course I'm not skipping meals, you know that, we have family dinners every night, and I eat, like, six meals a day," Tommy says, but Phil still looks ridiculously worried. Tommy squirms out of his grasp and rubs the sleeves of his sweatshirt up and down. This is really uncomfortable already. "What did you even want to talk about?"

Looking a little lost, Phil half-scoffs, but he backs off and runs a hand through his hair. "Right, I wanted to... it's your grades, Tommy," he says, and Tommy goes pale. Shit. He hadn't thought that his grades had gotten *that* bad. Phil sighs and crosses his arms. "Listen, I know you're brilliant, and you're not in *trouble*, but you've dropped pretty bad in a couple of your classes. And don't get me wrong, I don't give a shit how your grades are as long as you're doing your best, but it's clear that you're not."

"No, no, Phil, I *am*, I swear I am, things have just been crazy recently," Tommy says, and Phil shakes his head, clearly already exasperated. He goes to say something else, but Tommy steps forward, and a twinge of pain pierces his calf. He winces as the burn stings-stupid move, he should've just swallowed it down-and Phil somehow looks *more* worried. "It's fine, really, I'm fine, I just hurt my leg on my walk home, Phil, it's no big deal."

Phil seems completely bewildered, which would be almost funny if the situation weren't as serious. "First, you don't tell any of us what's going on with you, then your grades start to slip, and now you're injured and you're not telling me? Don't think I don't know it's worse than you're making it seem, either," Phil warns, and Tommy has the decency to direct his attention to the floor in shame. "Tommy, we're all here for you, but you have to *talk* to us. *What* is going on with you?"

There's another knock on the door, and before either of them can say anything, Wilbur is peeking into the room, glancing between the

two of them like he's walked into an active warzone or something. "Is this a bad time?" he asks, and Phil just gestures helplessly. Tommy groans, slumping into his desk chair. "I've got to talk to Tommy about his essay. He failed, which means he's dangerously close to failing the class."

"Are you serious? Wilbur, I spent six *hours* writing that fucking thing, that's not fair!" Tommy shouts, and he's out of the chair already. Wilbur starts to talk again, probably to give him some bullshit reason why he's failing Tommy, but Tommy doesn't let him. "No, man, fuck you! I worked so hard on that, I read the shit you wanted me to read, even with all the other shit going on in my life right now! You're doing this on purpose!"

"Toms, I'm not-"

"Yes, you are! You fucking *know* you are, Wilbur, I've never gotten lower than ten points off full marks on *any* essay," Tommy fumes, and Phil starts to step forward, ready to get in the middle of the stupid argument. Tommy shoulders past him, jabbing a finger in Wilbur's direction. "No, Phil, fuck off, this doesn't even have anything to do with you-!"

"It does, actually," Phil says calmly, and Tommy falters. That's Phil's no-nonsense tone-not even an ounce of shenanigans will be tolerated from this point, and Tommy knows it. "Now, I can't speak for Wil, but I do know that this isn't an isolated incident. If you don't talk to us, we can't help you, Tommy."

God this is so fucking frustrating. Tommy's in pain, he can't *tell* them what's wrong, and yeah, maybe he doesn't have his shit together just yet, but he will! He just needs a little time to readjust his life, since he's experienced, y'know, a *pretty big change*. "I can always tutor you if you need help with school stuff, man," Wilbur says, giving him an infuriatingly soft smile. "The school can offer accommodations if you need them, too."

Phil puts a hand on Tommy's shoulder, which he promptly shrugs off. "Listen, it's okay if you don't want to talk to *us*, but I can't have you internalizing whatever problems you're facing right now. You need to talk to *someone*, Tommy," Phil says, and Tommy rolls his

eyes. He doesn't need to talk to anyone, he *can't*. "I'm getting you a therapist."

No! Absolutely not, he won't have any time to fight crime if he's stuck in a therapist's appointment, and it'll throw off the entire fragile balance he's cultivating. "I don't need a fuckin' therapist, Phil, I'm *fine*! The only thing stressing me out right now is *you*!" Tommy shouts, which is partially true. Yeah, maybe he hadn't realized his grades are slipping, but he's got plenty of time to fix them!

"That's *enough*, you're going to talk to someone, and that's final," Phil says, and Tommy starts to pace, but another misstep has the burn on his leg flaring up again. In fact, it's so bad that Tommy has to grab the desk to steady himself. "Christ, kid, we should take you to the doctor's if you can't walk-"

"I can walk just fine," Tommy snaps, and he glares at Wilbur, who hovers nervously in the doorway. "I just want all of you to leave me the fuck alone."

Wilbur's face falls. "Toms-"

"Get out of my room!" he demands, and while Wilbur hightails it out, Phil doesn't seem to get the hint. Tommy settles on the bed, chest heaving as he tries his hardest to ignore the way his eyes are watering. If he can't handle a couple of burns, how's he supposed to handle everything else? He's survived bullets, he can take this on no problem. "What part of 'fuck off' don't you understand, old man?"

Phil rubs a hand over his face. The bastard looks tired, but he definitely can't be as tired as Tommy feels right now. "I respect your need for privacy right now, but at some point, as a parent, I have to step in and tell you to cut the shit," Phil says firmly. "As I understand it, you're hurt, probably in need of medical assistance, *which you're refusing*, and that makes me incredibly concerned. At least let one of us take a look so that we can make sure you've given yourself the right treatment."

Shit. Well, if there's anyone that he trusts to keep their mouth shut, it's Techno. Mostly because Techno hardly ever talks, partly because he's finally stopped that weird habit of randomly checking

in on Tommy, meaning he's the only one in this godforsaken family that minds his fucking business. Plus, Techno's got the most practical medical knowledge.

"Tell Techno he can do it," he says quietly, and Phil nods, eyes still scanning over Tommy's face worriedly. It annoys the fuck out of Tommy. But he leaves nonetheless, and Techno's soon alone with Tommy; he wouldn't be surprised if Phil or Wilbur are outside and trying to listen through the door, though. Tommy frowns up at Techno. "Phil's being a bitch and won't leave me alone, so could you tell him I'm fine?"

Techno crosses his arms and crouches down, poking one finger at Tommy's leg, which sends him into a spiral of curses. He flips Techno off, but he raises his pant leg anyway. "Uh, you wrapped this pretty poorly," he says, and Tommy resists the urge to kick him. Techno grabs the first aid kit, but remembering the bullet from a while ago is still in there, Tommy snatches it, holding it to his chest. Techno raises an eyebrow. "If you want my help, you're gonna have to let me use the first aid kit, Tommy."

"I know that," Tommy huffs, and Techno just stares at him blankly. Tommy's hands are, in fact, stuck to the plastic box in his panic, and he glowers down at Techno. "Just-close your eyes for a minute, alright?!"

Techno regards him with the most unamused look Tommy's ever seen, but he does it anyway, and Tommy hurries to shove the bullet casing under his pillow before nudging Techno's shoulder to let him know it's all clear. "Right, well," Techno starts, taking the first aid kit from Tommy, "first things first, good job on not usin' peroxide, it'll dry out the skin of a burn pretty bad if you're not careful. You don't have nearly enough burn cream applied, though, so let me just... there. The way you're gonna wanna wrap the bandages is way looser, like this."

Techno rewraps the bandages, and Tommy actually feels much better now that Techno's tended to the burn. "Thanks, Tech," Tommy mumbles, toeing at Techno's ankle as his brother stands, and Techno nods. He sits on the bed next to Tommy, hands folded in his lap. Tommy glares at him weakly, honestly too tired to get mad

again. "I'm not gonna talk about it."

"I'm not askin' you to," Techno says easily, and Tommy nods. They sit in silence for a while more, and then Techno turns the television on. It's the news. They're currently talking about the building where Tommy had saved that woman and her kid. Techno nods towards the screen. "Is that it? Were you nearby or something? You don't have to tell me, but at least tell me why you haven't told Phil you were over there."

"I dunno," Tommy says, voice dull, and Techno hums. The news story continues, and Tommy's brow furrows. There's a guy in the background; he hadn't been by the building when Tommy had gotten there, but as they show a clip from earlier during the blaze, Tommy spots the guy from a window in a neighboring building. "Techno, d'you recognize that guy? He looks familiar."

Techno leans closer to the screen, and Tommy glances at him nervously. One confused squint later-which makes Techno look ridiculous, quite frankly-he shrugs. "Nah, don't recognize him," he says, and Tommy grumbles a few curses under his breath. Techno glances over at him, clearly uncomfortable. "Do you, uh, want me to stay here, or...?"

"No, no, you can go," Tommy says, waving him off without looking. The guy looks so *familiar*, he's in a suit, he's got a stupid haircut, stupid facial hair. Tommy just can't seem to put his finger on who it is. He hears the door close again, but no one else comes in, thankfully. "Who the *fuck* are you, weird suit man...?"

Tommy's got no idea.

But he *really* doesn't like the way the guy is staring up at the burning building.

Not the identity reveal y'all were probably expecting, but rest assured, there *will* be one in the future ;)

lefty

Chapter 8: lefty

It's bank robbery time folks!

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

There have been eight fires in two weeks.

While Tommy's been completely exhausted, he can't complain about the tan he's gotten from the ordeal. Not like that's the most important part of it—he's managed to save everyone thus far, but he's cut it close a good few times. Phil and Wilbur have been a bit distant, only asking if he's okay or if he's ready to talk yet, but things have been normal with Techno, at the very least. Even if Ranboo shuts down whenever Tubbo mentions Spider-Man, and even if Tubbo talks about almost nothing *but* Spider-Man, at least Tommy's still got *some* sense of normalcy.

Speak of the damn devil.

"I *don't* want to talk about this anymore, Tubbo," Ranboo's voice says from behind him, and Tommy shoves some crisps in his mouth. He's not exactly itching to give his opinion in yet another squabble Tubbo and Ranboo are having before he can tell them both to cut it out. They start to set their things down on the other side of the table, but Tommy raises a finger. Ranboo sighs. "Ah, right."

"You know the rule, fellas," Tommy says, swallowing the bite of crisps. Tubbo rolls his eyes, and Tommy glares at him. "No bickering over Spider-Man at the lunch table."

The two of them nod, and Tommy permits them to sit. Tubbo perks

up, which can't mean anything good. "Oh! Is it against the rule to brag about Spider-Man related news?" Tubbo asks, waving his hand in the air as though Tommy's a teacher and he's waiting to be called on. Tommy just shrugs; he honestly wouldn't mind hearing about how awesome and cool he is. Ranboo starts to protest, but Tubbo steamrolls on. "I will *not* be interrupted by someone that can't even swim. As I was saying-"

"Wh-! Hey! I can swim!" Ranboo insists, and Tommy snorts. Ranboo rounds on him, eyes narrowed. "What the heck are *you* laughing at? I don't see *you* any more eager to join the swim team, *Tommy*."

Tubbo shoves at Ranboo. "Shut up and let me finish! *Anyways*, I think I've almost gotten Spider-Man to give me a shot at making him tech!" Tubbo says, oh-so-excited, and Tommy bites back a wince. Tubbo's definitely *never* going to make tech for him, mostly due to the fact that Tommy's pretty sure the fires are being set by *someone*, and he doesn't exactly want that someone to target Tubbo. "I've gotten three whole interviews after my first one, and he always sticks around after I stop recording!"

"I think that's just because he's a nice dude," Ranboo points out, and Tommy hums in agreement as he takes a bite of his sandwich. He *is* a nice dude.

Tubbo's eyes narrow. "I thought you hated Spider-Man," he says, and Tommy chokes on his sandwich. His poor food is going through so much today. Tubbo seems to be more mad than amused, though. "So when I could possibly have the opportunity of a lifetime, you write it off as Spider-Man being *nice*, but you can't stand him the rest of the time, is that it?"

Sighing, Ranboo runs a hand through his hair. "That's not what I- Tubbo, I didn't mean it like *that*, I'm just saying-he's not gonna let some civilian make his tech for him, no matter how talented they are, a-and you're really talented," he hurries to add as Tubbo glares. Some resolve appears in what little Tommy can see of Ranboo's expression, which is pretty uncommon for Ranboo. "Seriously, with how frequent these fires are, it's probably a good thing you're not tied up in a superhero's business."

At that, Tommy feels relieved that *someone's* validating his line of thought, even if Ranboo still holds a distaste for his alter ego. "Yeah, man, I think Spider-Man's alright-not a wrong'un, at least-but I gotta agree with Ranboob here," Tommy says, and Tubbo scowls. "Honestly, Big T, it's for the best. The fires *are* pretty suspicious."

"Sus," Tubbo says automatically, and Ranboo pretends to slam his head into the table. Tommy's shoulders shake with suppressed laughter, and finally, Tubbo relents, changing topics to something that Tommy, admittedly, has an interest in. "Have you lot finished the short response for Wilbur's class tomorrow? It was a fucking bitch to get through, I swear."

Groaning as he sinks lower in his seat, Ranboo covers his face with his hands. "Ugh, *no*, Mr. Soot's gonna be so pissed if I don't turn it in," he bemoans. "I've already missed, like, three assignments, I'm gonna lose my top five spot in the class."

Tommy and Tubbo both shoot him a flat look. "I'm almost failing, apparently, but I've been doing all of my fucking work, so if Wil doesn't grade my paper *fairly*, I'm going to stab him with one of Techno's swords," Tommy grumbles, and Tubbo gives him a sympathetic grimace. "Plus, Phil is, like, *this* close to grounding me. Can't take any chances."

"If you get grounded, Aunt Puffy's going to look at *my* grades, so *don't get grounded*," Tubbo instructs him, and Tommy puts his hands up by his chest in surrender. At Ranboo's questioning look, Tubbo shrugs. "Aunt Puffy and Phil talk a *lot*. Just can't risk it. So long as I'm passing my classes, I'm fine, but I've been toeing the line in algebra as of recently, and I do *not* need that kind of heat right now."

A snort escapes Tommy as he downs half his sandwich in pretty much one go. He's noticed that Phil sneaks him what's essentially another meal in his lunch now, which he's not going to complain about, but it's weird nonetheless. Tommy's pretty sure Phil still thinks he's not eating or sleeping enough. In Phil's defense, the latter is definitely true, but Tommy never quite feels tired; he chalks it up to superpower stuff.

Just as Tubbo and Ranboo break out into an argument about which *The Office* cast member is the best, Tommy's phone buzzes as Tubbo's chimes. A crime alert. Tubbo takes off immediately, ignoring Ranboo's protests. "Sorry, big man. I'll go make sure he doesn't die," Tommy says, and Ranboo shakes his head.

As Tommy sneaks out through a bathroom window, already having changed into his suit, he looks down at his phone, expecting another fire. However, the alert is nothing of the sort; it's a robbery-which, simple enough, Tommy's glad to have somewhat of a break-but it's been labeled as a code thirty, which means it's an emergency, and the cops involved need help *very urgently*. Tommy hates code thirties; the cops are always ridiculous, claiming they would've been fine without his help and essentially telling him to fuck off in polite police jargon.

But The Sense-Tommy's glad to have it back, it's been a fucking *while*, Sense, Christ-is telling him that something's *seriously* wrong with this one. As Tommy swings through the city, he keeps an eye out for Tubbo, but he can't seem to find him. Slippery bastard's always been good at hiding, unfortunately. Tommy lands atop a building nearby to the address in the crime alert, surveying the area. It doesn't look as though there's anyone outside, other than a few cop cars that have surrounded the building, a bank, to be precise, that don't seem to be getting any closer.

So Tommy lands on the ground in a very epic superhero pose and heads towards the officer that looks like she's in charge. "Oh, Spider-Man," she says, distaste lacing her tone, and Tommy can't believe he's fed the fuck up *already*. "Go home, you're not needed. This is a few notches above your paygrade, anyway."

Scowling, even though she can't see it, Tommy crosses his arms. "Listen, *miss*, we can do this the easy way, where you give me as much information on what's been happening as possible, or the hard way, where I'll go in blind and possibly endanger civilians that I could have saved with your cooperation," he says flatly. He's learned his lesson when it comes to cursing out cops; he doesn't want to be tased again, thanks. It had been a very unpleasant experience.

To Tommy's surprise, the officer falters, sighing after a moment. "It was supposed to be simple, just send in a few men to apprehend the guy and be done with it," she says, and Tommy nods, gesturing for her to elaborate. "The perp's got some kinda gas or something-knocked out everyone in the building except for himself. We've got snipers and assault rifles trained on him, so he's not coming out anytime soon. Before you ask, the one guy we sent in with a gas mask didn't come back out."

Well, shit. He shares that sentiment with the officer, who barks out a laugh. "Let me see what I can do," Tommy says, webbing himself up and away. He lands atop the doorway to the bank and makes a face at the green-ish gas leaking from underneath him. It kind of smells like dirt. He crawls up the side of the building and peeks down into the windows, immediately going pale at the sight below him.

Sure enough, there's a robber, but he's not dressed like robbers that Tommy's beat the shit out of before. Mans is fully decked out. What looks to be a flamethrower-or at least, a weapon that *looks* like it-is firmly strapped to his back, and the guy's face is covered by a pair of sunglasses and mask; he's wearing a hoodie, too-bright blue and obnoxious, the white hood of it pulled up to cover his hair. The sunglasses he's wearing look stupid as well, but it's not as stupid as the fact the guy's holding the strap of the gun with his left hand.

He's a lefty.

Tommy narrows his eyes, scanning the scene while wondering what the fuck the fires have to do with a bank robbery, given that whoever's behind both are *definitely* working together. Classic conspiracy theory stuff. Then again, this 'robbery' doesn't seem like one, given that everyone in the immediate vicinity is conked out on the floor, and Lefty doesn't have anything on him but the flamethrower thingy. He opens the window as quietly as possible, slipping in and keeping it open. Hopefully, it'll get that gas out of here.

"Fuck's sakes, he's not even *here*. This was pointless," Lefty says, clearly irritated as he whisper-yells into a phone. He paces back and forth, blissfully unaware of Tommy, who is being very stealthy and cool on the ceiling. Lefty pauses, then huffs, then laughs. It's a bitter

kind of sound-he's super pissed. "No, just-! I'm not gonna ask for him, the fuck do I look like?... Yeah, alright, that's fair, I'll give you that one. But seriously, don't-"

"Yoohoo!" Tommy calls, sticking a web to the banister he's standing on and letting himself hang upside-down in front of Lefty. He's grown bored of the bad guy convo that Lefty's been having, so it's time to fuck this guy up. "A little birdie told me you were looking for someone. Is it me? Am I the guest of honor? Gosh, I'm so underdressed!"

Lefty hangs up and glares at him-probably, Tommy can't see much of his face-and whips the flamethrower thingy off his back, aiming it right at Tommy's face and *poof!* There goes the dynamite. Or, well, cloud of weirdly thick gas. Lefty's jaw drops, if his mask moving is to be trusted, as the gun falls to his side, and he backs away. An understandable choice, really, but Tommy's still going to kick Lefty's ass for knocking out so many civilians.

The hand on the flamethrower-gasthrower?-is trembling. "How the hell are you still conscious?!" Lefty demands, sounding surprisingly steady for a guy that looks about to piss his pants. Tommy just coughs, waving the cloud of gas away. "My spores should've had you out on the floor, just like the rest of them!"

"Spores? The fuck are you, some kinda mushroom?" Tommy says, laughter lacing his voice as he gets into a fighting stance. He throws a punch towards Lefty, who blocks it with his... weapon, whatever the fuck it is. Lefty swings the ass end of the gun at his face, and Tommy blocks it, only just stopping it in time. *C'mon*, Sense, wake the hell up, Tommy's fucking counting on you to catch these things! "Alright, so we're playing dirty? Can't say I'm a fan of that, but I also can't say you aren't the first person I've gotten to have a conversation with since I started being Spider-Man, so at least you're keeping me on my toes!"

Lefty growls in frustration as he dodges a kick, and he swings his fist at Tommy's face, only mildly surprised when Tommy catches it. "Do you ever shut *up?*!" Lefty huffs, and Tommy sweeps his feet out from under him, webbing his left arm to the floor, subsequently keeping the weapon out of play. Hah. Tommy's so clever. Lefty

looks panicked, and Tommy's almost ready to write this off as an easy victory, before the very building starts shaking, and Lefty's look of panic dissolves into one of relief. "You gonna stop me or save the rest of 'em? Bank's gonna collapse in a few, so you oughta make your choice sooner rather than later."

Tommy curses under his breath, but he goes for the civilians. He'll catch Lefty eventually, but he's only got one chance to get the civilians out. Women and children first, he supposes; boat rules are gonna have to apply, given he's the only one able to handle the mushroom gunk in the air at the moment. The building shakes every time Tommy ducks in and out, handing civilians off to paramedics and webbing the ceiling together to make sure none of it falls on the unconscious bank-goers.

He goes as quickly as he can, and he manages to get the last few civilians out. Tommy dashes back inside anyway, hoping to catch Lefty before his webs wear off, but he's already gone, clean-cut webbing in his wake. Tommy struggles to keep his balance as the building shakes again, and he dashes out; as cool and amazing as Tommy's superpowers are, there's no way they can stop a fucking bomb without at *least* ten minute's notice.

Sure enough, the glass of the doors shatters as he starts to swing away, and Tommy feels more than hears the blast, squeezing his eyes shut as he's propelled forward, landing harshly on the asphalt. Smart move on the cops' part to stay back like a bunch of cowards. Tommy chuckles weakly to himself and struggles to stand, surprised and pained by a grip on his arm.

It's the officer lady. "Where's Dale?!" she demands, eyes wide and panicked, and Tommy feels so *tired* all of a sudden. Officer lady shakes him, and Tommy whimpers at the pain that shoots through him-his ears are ringing. "Where the *fuck* is Officer Davenport, Spider-Man?!"

"I-I don't know," Tommy manages, and she drops her hold on him like he's a hot iron, letting him fall to the ground and hack a lung up. Metaphorically, of course. Tommy's pretty sure that even with the whole regeneration thing, he'd be doomed if he literally coughed up a lung. "I'm sorry, I tried to get... to... t'get ev'rybody out."

The officer reaches a shaking hand to her mouth and turns away. There's a pit of guilt something awful in Tommy's gut, but he's feeling exhaustion seep into his bones. *Fuck*. Is this how the people in there had felt? It's like every missed hour of sleep is catching up to him at once. It's not as though Tommy'd assumed he'd been impervious to the spores, but Jesus, this is awful.

He stumbles away, only half-sure he'd mumbled another apology, and he ducks into an alleyway, swallowing down the bile that rises in his throat. Tommy missed someone. He *missed* someone, how could he have *missed someone?! He's never failed before, he's always been able to save everyone*. No casualties in the fires, none with robberies or muggings, none with busted drug deals either. But this? This fucking *aches*.

The guilt swirls around his ribs in sick tendrils and *squeezes* until Tommy can't fucking breathe properly anymore. He gags, then proceeds to empty his stomach of his lunch beside him in the alleyway, barely getting his mask up over his mouth in time to do it. Even in his delirious, exhausted state, Tommy's not stupid enough to take it off all the way. Feeling even more sick at the way his vomit's been stained a dark green-probably the fucking spores-Tommy turns away and his shoulders start shaking.

Idly, Tommy realizes he's crying. His vision is fucking *swimming*, maybe he's tripping balls or something, maybe that's what the fucking spores do to you, but Tommy's exhausted, he's been blown up, and he's hysterical with grief. This fucking sucks. *It's probably worse for Officer Davenport*, his mind traitorously hisses, *since you got him killed and all*.

Tommy wants to protest, to say he did his best, but he'd had room on his back in that last trip. If he hadn't been so fucking unobservant, that guy might still be alive. And oh, *fuck*, if the initial realization hadn't been enough to make him retch, this one definitely is. Tommy's dry-heaving, which hurts his lungs, which hurts his back, which hurts his *everything*, because he's just been fucking *blown up*, and he can't even go to anyone to get help.

There's no one to help him.

Not even when he passes out in the alleyway.

Tommy wakes up in an oddly familiar bedroom, but he's still got his mask on. There's a hushed argument happening somewhere nearby, but his body aches too much for him to bother to try and eavesdrop. Groaning, Tommy squeezes his eyes shut tight. The argument falls silent, then after a moment, it returns. Tommy should roll onto his stomach; if he doesn't, he'll probably damage his back worse than it already is. It fucking *hurts*.

His ears have stopped ringing, at least, which is probably good. Unfortunately for him, this means he can hear the argument happening not even ten feet away from him. "-insane, man, this is crazy!" someone says, and it sounds so familiar Tommy's going to lose it. "You have to tell Ms. Puffy about this, at least!"

Oh, how lovely, is Puffy here? Tommy would love to thank her for the cookies she'd sent Tubbo over with the other day. Puffy's quite nice, honestly, Tommy wouldn't mind it if she'd been the one to find him and-oh, the other voice is talking now. "Are you serious?! Absolutely fucking not! Even if that wasn't the world's dumbest goddamn idea, how do you suggest I break the news to her?! 'Oh, hey, Aunt P, I've got a superhero up in my room right now, just helping him rest after he's been blown up!' Is that how you're suggesting I go about it?!"

Ah, so he's at Tubbo's house. That explains quite a lot, actually, he-

Fuck, he's at Tubbo's house.

Tommy sits up with a start, and Tubbo and Ranboo both whip their heads around to look at him. It'd be funny if Tommy weren't so panicked. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, please tell me you didn't take my mask off," Tommy says, chest heaving. This is so bad. This is so fucking bad. If Tubbo and Ranboo know who he is, that means they could be targeted by Lefty or whoever it is that's been lighting those fires.

"Woah, woah, chill out, man, don't strain yourself!" Ranboo says, hurrying over to him, and Tommy flinches back, instinctively aiming

his web shooters. Ranboo puts his hands up, clearly just as nervous as Tommy. "We didn't take your mask off, dude, we swear. We had to, uh, take your suit off, but that's because it probably would've infected your burns. We put your web shooters back on, though!"

Tommy looks down, and sure enough, he's in a pair of joggers way too long to be Tubbo's, and a novelty t-shirt, one that Puffy probably sells at her shop. "Oh. Um. Thank you...?" he says, and he pretends to notice Tubbo for the first time, snapping his fingers. "Hey! I know you, you're the interview kid! How are you, man? Didn't get hurt in the bank blast, did you?"

"No, no, I'm-I should be asking *you* how you are," Tubbo says, eyes wide. Good. That's really good. Tommy's not sure if he'd be able to handle the idea of Tubbo getting hurt because of Spider-Man. Tubbo takes his silence as a question-which it hadn't been, Tommy just keeps getting lost in his thoughts. "Um, right, so... I was sort of following crime alerts to try and interview you, y'know? And, see, I saw the bank alert, but I didn't get there until after the bomb had gone off, and at that point, I was looking for shortcuts on the way back to school and-"

"He found you unconscious in an alleyway and texted me for help," Ranboo blurts, and Tubbo glares at him. Ranboo gestures between them and Tommy frantically. "Wh-! C'mon, Tubbo, I'm kinda losing it here! I still vote we tell Puffy." Ranboo crosses his arms, and Tubbo whacks him upside the head. It's a bit of a stretch for him.

Tommy, on the other hand, completely agrees with Tubbo. "No one is telling *anyone* that I'm here, is that clear?" he asks in the most commanding tone of voice he can manage, and it must work, given that Ranboo and Tubbo both nod. With a sigh, Tommy turns his attention to Tubbo, who beams. "While I appreciate the help-and trust me, I appreciate it a lot-I'm going to have to ask you to stay away from active crime scenes from now on. It's dangerous, especially for civilians. Your friend here's got a good head on his shoulders."

Ranboo blinks in surprise at the sudden compliment. "Oh, uh... thank you, Mr. Spider-Man," he says, and Tommy almost snorts. He still feels exhausted, a bone-deep kind of tired aching all throughout

his body. Ranboo jumps, like he's just remembered something, and he reaches into a bag, handing Tommy an undamaged suit. "Here's your suit, before you go. Tubbo fixed it up for you. He didn't add anything fancy, I made sure."

"Because Ranboo is a killjoy, I wasn't able to make any *actual* modifications, only enough repairs to put it back in working condition," Tubbo explains with a pout, and Tommy holds the bundle of fabric with a grip so strong, he's probably going to have to think of Henry to unstick his hands. "I *did* sew some stronger fabrics into your hoodie and shorts, just so that they don't fall apart like that every time you encounter a bomb."

"Not that we hope you encounter any more bombs anytime soon!" Ranboo hurries to add, waving his hands in front of him. "Today must've sucked for you dude, we're sorry."

Tommy just waves dismissively. This is his burden to bear, not theirs. "I'll get out of your hair now," he says, opening up Tubbo's window. He hesitates, glancing back at his two friends. What they'd done for him today is absolutely *insane*, and Ranboo doesn't even like Spider-Man. He's really fucking lucky. "Thanks again, fellas."

Their farewells fading away as he swings out of sight, Tommy lets himself breathe. He's still dangerously close to passing out, so he definitely can't head back to school. It might completely blow his cover, but he can always say that Phil caught him on his way back and made him stay home because of the explosion. That would probably work. Christ, he's so fucking tired. Not only physically, but, like, his *brain* is exhausted. Tommy feels like he needs a three-day nap.

Landing in his usual alleyway, Tommy stuffs both his fixed supersuit and the clothes that they'd let him leave with in the duffel bag and slowly but surely pulls on his usual going-home clothes; a good old sweatshirt and baggy jeans. If he can't see any injuries, neither will his family, and Tommy would very much like to keep it that way.

He climbs up to his window from the side of the house and slips into his bedroom. Tubbo will probably bring his abandoned backpack over later, but for now, Tommy's just going to crawl into bed and

pass out. God, he can't wait to fall asleep in his own bed instead of a fucking alleyway. Tommy mentally kicks himself as he ducks under the covers and brings Henry up to his chest, cradling the little cow there.

It had been astronomically stupid to pass out in an alley like that. His identity could've been exposed, Lefty could've found him and finished off the job, he could've been kidnapped and held for ransom-God, Tommy feels so fucking dumb. He should've just grit his teeth and bore the pain, should've gotten himself home, even if he'd never be able to make it back to school. The Sense should've fucking *warned* him that someone was there, but it's decided to be a bitch and come and go as it pleases.

Tommy shudders as a breeze rushes in through the still-open window. He should really get up and close it, but he *can't*. His entire body isn't moving. Tommy would panic about it more, but he's already on the verge of sleep. As his eyes slide shut, he hears the door creak open, and there's a gasp-then a scream.

And Tommy falls asleep.

Someone's humming.

When he wakes up again, the sun's gone, and there are fingers carding through his hair. His eyes are still shut, but Tommy knows he's awake anyway. He leans into the touch, cringing when the action brings him away from Henry. As he tugs Henry closer to him, there's a very familiar laugh amongst the hums, as if the mirth is carrying the tune in harmony with the voice creating it. He shifts, and the hand in his hair brushes his curls away from his face.

"Welcome to the land of the living, kiddo," Kristin murmurs, and Tommy's eyes *immediately* open. She chuckles again, gently nudging him down against the pillow as he tries in vain to sit up and tackle her in a hug. Worrying at her bottom lip, Kristin looks back and forth between his eyes. "Do you want to talk about what happened?"

"No," Tommy says in a voice too small for his body, and Kristin shuts her eyes and sighs, thumb brushing just below a cut on Tommy's cheek. He winces, and she draws back. "What are you doing back so early, n'yways? New York kick you out or something?"

She laughs again, shaking her head. "No, I wasn't kicked out of New York. I came home early 'cuz I was worried about you," Kristin tells him. He raises an eyebrow at her, and she rolls her eyes. "Alright, fine, I also missed the rest of my boys, but Phil... he called last night. And honestly, I understand why. I know, I know, you don't want to talk about it. I just think you *should*. If not to me, then... to someone, alright? I know how hard it can be to keep secrets-or feel like you *have* to-from the people you love. I don't want that for you, Tommy, none of us do."

Swallowing around the lump in his throat, Tommy clutches harder at Henry. "I'm sorry," he whispers, and Kristin looks absolutely heartbroken. Through his tired haze, Tommy can't really understand why she's so sad, and he reaches up with the hand not holding Henry to squeeze her wrist gently. "I'm sorry."

She looks away from him; Tommy doesn't know why. "It's not you, bubs," she says, and Tommy hasn't heard that nickname in a long time. The television's on, it's muted, but Tommy can still see news footage of the bank explosion.

Officer Davenport.

His breath catches in his throat, and Tommy suddenly can't breathe, and he can't see because of these stupid fucking *tears*. Kristin pulls him in close, clearly panicked, and Tommy laughs for a second before it dissolves back into sobs. "S'my fault," he croaks out, too tired to filter what he's saying, and Kristin pulls back, brows furrowed in confusion as she wipes his tears away with her thumb. "S'all my fault, Mum, I-! *Dammit!*"

"Want me to get Phil? Or Wilbur?" Kristin asks, and Tommy shakes his head. Things are still so awkward between them, and Tommy doesn't exactly want to talk about what's happened. "Okay, Toms, that's okay. I'll stay here. You, uh, kind of stink, though, you might want to take a shower whenever you're feeling up to it."

A surprised bark of a laugh bubbles up from Tommy, and he's soon shaking with laughter, Kristin still rubbing a soothing hand between his shoulders. It doesn't hurt as much as it should, but Tommy assumes that's just the regeneration at work. The door opens quietly, and Tommy doesn't really have the energy to look up to see who it is.

"Hey, Kristin, Phil wanted me to-oh! Oh, he's up," Techno's voice says from the doorway, and Tommy feels Kristin suppress her laughter. He pulls away from her and sits up properly, and Techno's eyes go wide. "You look terrible. Not-I don't mean it like *that*, I... Tommy, what the hell happened to you? Do I have to go beat someone up? 'Cuz I've got plans later, and I only get so much social interaction a year, so..."

"At ease, soldier, we don't know what happened," Kristin says, a teasing lilt to her voice, and Tommy slumps back against his pillows. He winces when the metal of the bullet he'd hidden bites into his hip. Thankfully, Kristin and Techno just take it as him being generally in pain, and she turns back to Techno. "What does Phil need?"

Techno shifts, foot to foot. "He's askin' if you wanted to join us for dinner. He probably doesn't know you're up yet, Tommy," he explains, and Tommy feels his stomach lose its figurative mind at the notion of food. He shifts to start standing, then winces. Techno looks unimpressed. "I'm not carryin' you downstairs, better learn to walk again."

"You fuckin' learn to walk, you asshole, I'll stab the shit out of you," Tommy grumbles, and Kristin's twinkly laugh fills the room.

"There he is," she says softly, ruffling his hair. "Good to have you back, buddy."

Tubbo and Ranboo struggling to carry an unconscious Spider-Man through the city without being seen is a ridiculously funny mental image and I hope you all know that I absolutely *cackled* envisioning

it.

is it true?

Chapter 9: is it true?

Techno decides that enough's enough. It's time to start sleuthing.

Take your bets, folks, how do you think this is gonna go?

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Techno knows something's going on with Tommy.

Aside from the obvious-the slipping grades, the lashing out, the mysterious injuries-he's noticed that Tommy's been sneaking out. That in itself isn't particularly telling, Techno knows Tommy sneaks out occasionally to mess around in the abandoned parts of the tube line, but it happens during the day, too. Techno will go up to Tommy's room to check on him for whoever's the most concerned and awkward that day and find no trace of the kid.

Since Techno's not heartless, he's been covering for Tommy, but this method has somehow convinced Phil that Techno is currently the only member of their family that Tommy talks to properly, which is horrible for multiple reasons. Techno would much rather hand Tommy's problem child behavior off to Kristin, but Kristin is a parental figure and is therefore obligated to report Tommy's absences and personal business to the other parental figure in the household. Wilbur, admittedly, has also been giving Tommy a pretty hard time, and the awkwardness is almost too much for *Techno* to bear, so Techno's not about to pawn him off to Wilbur, either. Not to

mention, Wilbur's a snitch.

Techno sighs; he can't concentrate on his assignments right now. He leans back in his desk chair and glances over at the few decorative swords on the wall. He keeps the good ones in his workshop, but the few expensive ones he owns-including the cutlass from Kristin-are up on his wall. He wonders, idly, if he should teach Tommy more proper techniques for fighting. If someone at school is giving him a hard time or whatever, Techno could probably set some time aside to help his kid brother out.

It's not as if Tommy would *take* his help, though. He's been denying it from everyone else in their family, after all. But Techno would still *offer*. And contrary to popular belief, Techno actually does care about Tommy's wellbeing. Something's clearly wrong here, and if Tommy won't even talk to *Kristin* about it, well... it's definitely a problem.

See, Techno's initial plan was just to keep covering for Tommy, to keep minding his business and pretending that no, Phil, Tommy's just taking a nap and yes, Wilbur, Tommy's feeling much better. Now, though, Tommy's been gone for a day and a half straight, and Techno is *this* close to telling Phil and having him file a missing person report.

Phil knocks on his door-Techno can tell it's Phil because Wilbur just barges right in, usually-and Techno opens it, not at all surprised by the worried expression on his face. "Tech, have you seen Tommy today? He's not in his room," he says, and Techno holds back a sigh.

"I think he said he was staying at that Ranboo kid's place, but I wasn't really listening," Techno lies through his teeth, feeling kind of guilty as relief clearly washes over Phil. He shifts from foot to foot. "Um, Phil, have you managed to talk to him at all? Talk to him seriously, I mean, we all know the kid can talk endlessly about nothing."

There's that tension again. "I haven't, no," Phil says, arms wrapped around himself, and Techno feels bad for even bringing it up. Phil sighs and scrubs his face with his hands, looking more tired than

Techno's seen him in a while. "I'm sorry, Tech, I should be asking you how your classes have been going. You doin' alright, mate?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Techno says, and the two of them fall into an awkward silence. Again, something incredibly unusual. It's always been easy with Phil; Kristin's more unpredictable, more chaotic, and while Techno's chaotic moods crop up occasionally, they do pass. Phil and Techno get along because they both prefer calm to chaos, with Wilbur being an easy mix of both, and Tommy *definitely* leaning towards chaotic. Their family dynamic is weird. Techno clears his throat. "Classes are good."

"Good," Phil says, nodding, "that's good."

The tension is palpable.

"So, um, did you need anything else, or...?" Techno asks, and Phil opens his mouth to say something else, but evidently decides against it, shaking his head and giving Techno's shoulder a brief squeeze before heading back downstairs. Techno can hear the television switch on; it's some news report about that Spider-Man kid.

"... been active for quite some time now, almost 39 hours straight of civilians reporting Spider-Man sightings in the greater London area," the newscaster's voice travels up to the second floor, and Techno pauses, his door halfway closed. *"We're getting word now that this is likely due to the criminal responsible for the robbery that occurred on Friday afternoon on Eighth Street. Reports say he fled the scene, and Spider-Man confirmed that this has been the motivation of his patrol vigil to an amateur reporter on Twitter."*

Techno closes the door. He's already been blackmailed by Tubbo into following that stupid stan account, he doesn't need to hear the interview twice. He settles back into his desk chair and huffs at the cursor still blinking on a painfully blank document. He really has to get this assignment done, it's due in a few days.

But he really *can't* concentrate, given that Tommy's absence is still nagging at the back of his mind. Maybe he's way off here, but Techno's pretty sure a seventeen-year-old doesn't stay out for over

twenty-four hours without a serious reason. Sure, Tommy's spent weekends at Tubbo's before, but never without a call or text; the kid *always* forgets something at home, and Wilbur *always* takes it to him, proceeding to complain to Techno about it the entire time.

He hates to admit it, but Techno's too worried about Tommy to concentrate on his classes. Huh. Usually, it's the other way around.

Techno gets up and slips out of his room, padding quietly across the hall, because if anyone catches him snooping, Techno will *never* hear the end of it. He presses his ear against Tommy's door, hoping to hear the telltale bumps and clunks of Tommy moving around. Kid's ridiculously clumsy, he can't *not* make noise. Techno doesn't hear anything, so he gingerly opens the door, careful not to make it squeak like it always does.

Sure enough, the room's empty, the bed perfectly made and the desk clean. That in itself is odd, especially for Tommy, whose organization method seems to be tossing things wherever and hoping he'll find them again eventually. Techno spots something peeking out from underneath the bed, and he crouches down to drag it slowly out.

It's the first-aid kit.

That wouldn't be surprising ordinarily-like Techno had said, Tommy's a clumsy kid-but it's absolutely *stuffed* with medical supplies, the kind of stuff you have to buy at, like, a pretty decent store, and Techno doesn't remember Phil going on any first-aid supply runs recently. Techno carefully tucks the first aid kit back under the bed and stands again, looking around the bedroom. Maybe he should feel worse about snooping in Tommy's stuff than he does, but no kid needs *that* many bandages. Something is seriously wrong.

Techno heads over to Tommy's desk and starts to sift through the neatly stacked pile of papers by the monitor. He pauses; the corner of the desk has been haphazardly glued back together. Weird. Techno goes back to the papers. There are a few assignments, all of them marked lower than Tommy would normally get on homework, but Techno files that under 'unpack later' and keeps

sorting through the stack. Some doodles, most of them so crude it's hard to make heads or tails of anything Tommy had been trying to draw.

Class notes, grid paper with indecipherable graphs, pretty much normal crap that Techno finds completely uninteresting. Techno's about to give up on finding anything on the desk when he comes across some sketches that are actually pretty decent. They look old, the ones at the front of the page anyway, but there are some on the back that are newer, less smudged.

They're covering a notebook, and Techno's hesitates. Delving into Tommy's notebook seems like a bit of a bigger invasion of privacy. He shrugs. Sue him, he's nosy. As he opens up the book, his eyes go wide. These are all *inventions*, with specs so detailed, Techno can't even understand half of them. He knows Tommy's smart, but *Christ*. It's no wonder his grades are slipping when he's spending all this brainpower on these... gadgets.

None of them are labeled, so Techno doesn't know what they're for, but they still contribute to the pit of anxiety that's settled in Techno's gut. The first aid kit, the disappearances, the sketches-something clearly bigger than school issues or friend problems is going on with Tommy. He should probably tell Phil about this. But if he does, Tommy's going to either give Techno the cold shoulder or be *extra* annoying.

And Techno can't take his chances with the latter.

But he also hates it when Phil's mad at him. Well, Phil never gets *mad*, but the silent disappointment on his face until things blow over is always the worst. He really is stuck between Scylla and Charybdis here; he's not really sure what he's supposed to do. Techno groans, sitting down on Tommy's bed and rubbing his eyes. There's something digging into his thigh, and Techno's brow furrows, lifting the corner of the pillow where it meets his leg and grabbing the little object.

It's a bullet.

Why is there a bullet on Tommy's bed?!

Inhaling sharply, Techno drops the bullet, and it clatters to the ground, the sound thankfully dulled by the carpet. What the *hell* is Tommy doing with a bullet?! Okay, Techno *definitely* has to tell Phil about this now. Does Tommy have a gun?! *Who sold Tommy a gun?!* Techno runs a hand through his hair, completely and utterly frazzled.

Dammit, now he's got to go watch the news in case Tommy's there being arrested for armed robbery or something.

Techno carefully tucks the bullet into his pocket and straightens up the papers he'd strewn around Tommy's desk, then slips out of the room and heads downstairs. Phil and Kristin are chatting happily on the couch, cuddled together. Disgusting. "Hey," Techno says, unsure, and both of them look up at him, twin ghosts of laughter still on their faces. "You guys, uh, watchin' the news still?"

"Yeah! Spider-Man's still out and about, that's mostly what's on," Kristin says with a shrug, and Techno's nods, sinking into his usual armchair. She huffs and leans over to nudge Techno's arm. "Hey, what do you make of this Spider-Man guy, Tech?"

Shrugging, Techno glances over at the screen. Spider-Man pictures-mostly from Tubbo's Twitter, Techno knows-are being cycled through next to the news anchor. "He's alright, seems like he's got good intentions," Techno says, and Phil hums his agreement. "Thanks again for the cutlass, Kristin. Looks great with the antique scabbard."

"Oh, the one with the rubies on the handle?" Phil asks, and Techno nods. It's one of his favorites, Phil had bought it for him for Christmas one year. Phil takes a sip of tea and then perks up, and Techno sinks down into his chair. "Say, Techno, how's that essay going for your Greek class?"

"The Greek language is a burden on my shoulders and a plague on my mental health," Techno answers, not at all dramatically, and Kristin laughs. "How's your generic office job, old man?"

Phil points a finger at him. "Shut."

The news cuts to what's clearly shaky footage from Tubbo's Twitter, but it's something Techno hasn't seen before. *"Spider-Man! Spider-Man! How do you plan on stopping 404?"* Tubbo's voice says from behind the camera, and Techno furrows his brow in confusion. Evidently, Spider-Man's just as confused, because he tilts his head and waits for Tubbo to elaborate. *"I call him 404 because he hasn't been found. Like the web error, y'know?"*

Techno snorts, and Phil and Kristin both laugh. That's actually a little clever. *"I've been, uh, trying to track him down,"* Spider-Man says, a hand rubbing the back of his neck. Something tinged with fear sparks at the back of his mind, and Techno sits up a little straighter. *"Trying out different patrol routes, stuff like that. Might be hard, all things considered, but thank you for your support, kid. Rest assured, I'm doing everything I can to protect this city."*

He tries to place where he's heard that voice before. It sounds so familiar, and not just from the clips he's seen on his Twitter feed. Techno frowns, leaning forward in his seat. "Hey, does he sound-I dunno, like-"

Spider-Man's boisterous laugh echoes through the room.

Oh, *shit*.

Tommy's having a day.

Not a good day-he's only caught a few wrong'uns today-and not a bad day-he hasn't been shot, only lightly stabbed-but a day. Well, technically his 'day' has lasted about forty-two hours, so it's really no wonder he's had a day. He's in an isolated enough area and on a high-up enough building to take his mask off and properly eat some takeout he'd gotten at a food truck a couple minutes ago. Thank fuck for falafel.

As he devours his food, Tommy reflects on what little he's accomplished in terms of learning about-as Tubbo had called him-404. He'd checked every shady part of the damn city, combed through every disgusting alleyway and abandoned fucking

warehouse. No leads, no clues, no four-oh-fucking-four. The guy's a shitty mockery of an enigma, and Tommy can't find him anywhere. The man leaves no trace!

In any case, he should probably head home sometime soon. If Phil asks, Tommy's just going to say he's been at Tubbo's or something. Tubbo would cover for him. Honestly, Tommy's surprised Phil hasn't already asked him about any of his mysterious disappearances. Now that Kristin's home, Tommy's had to avoid two pairs of eyes, and he doesn't really know how he's *still* getting away with it.

Tommy scarfs down the rest of his meal and sets the takeout container aside; he'll toss it out on his way home, but for now, he'd love to just look out at the sunset and take it in. Tommy hasn't let himself have a break in forty-two hours, after all. He should probably feel much more tired than he does, but he supposed it comes with the superpower territory.

The sky's so pretty at this hour, and the view is so much better from up here. Tommy hasn't seen a proper sunset in ages. "Oh! Hello, Shp-suh-Spider-Man," someone says from behind him, and Tommy tugs his mask back on, turning to see-what the fuck is Wilbur doing here?! He gives him a tentative wave, and Wilbur hums, clearly drunk. "Are you up here t'smoke too?"

"Smoke...?" Tommy asks, brows furrowed. Wilbur waves dismissively, pulling a pack of cigarettes from his pocket along with a lighter. Tommy frowns; Wilbur doesn't smoke.

Wilbur offers him a cigarette, and Tommy shakes his head. "Ah, should've known a superhero wouldn't smoke," he says, putting the one he'd offered between his lips instead and carefully lighting it. Tommy makes a face; the smell is fucking putrid, and it's only made worse by his enhanced senses. Wilbur doesn't even cough or anything. "You here t'stop the party?"

"What party?" Tommy asks, tilting his head. Wilbur just shrugs, and Tommy stands, crossing his arms. Wilbur's supposed to be at a Teacher's Association conference this weekend. That's what he'd told the rest of them, at least. "Is there something going on I should be stopping?"

Wilbur just takes a long drag from his cigarette. "Nah, Quackity's jus' throwing one for the teachers from the conference," he slurs, and he sits down on the roof. Tommy walks over and sits next to him. "Spider-Man, do superheroes give good advice?"

Tommy twiddles his thumbs. The cigarette smoke stinks. He can't believe he hadn't known Wilbur smokes. "Sure, but do you *have* to smoke? Those fuckers kill you, *and* it smells like absolute shit," he says, and Wilbur lets out a surprised laugh, but he puts the cigarette out next to him. "Uh, thanks."

"Not about to say no to a guy that can kick my ass," Wilbur says, and his breath smells like cigarettes. Tommy hates it. A lot. "Anyways, I got this brother, right? Good kid, s'got a helluva head on his shoulders, but he's been, like the *worst* lately. Just. Ugh. Not like s'his fault or anything, but he's not exactly doin' anything to fix things, f'you catch my drift. What d'you think, big fancy hero man?"

"I think you're drunk and need to get home," Tommy says easily, and Wilbur's comment about him being the worst definitely doesn't sting, no sir, not at all. Wilbur makes some kind of weird noise and flips him off. Tommy snorts. "Alright, well... good luck with your brother, man. And quit smoking. Health risks aside, it makes you look like a douche."

Wilbur shoots him a thumbs-up and a drunken little grin, and Tommy sighs, picking up his empty takeout container and waving at Wilbur as he falls backwards over the edge of the roof. He lets himself relish in the breeze for a solid five seconds before shooting a web out towards a nearby skyscraper and swinging off towards a nearby garbage can.

Slam-dunk! Fuck yeah!

Tommy starts to swing off towards his normal alleyway, but he catches a whiff of smoke. Not Wilbur's cigarette kind, but the even-worse kind. Ah *shit*, he'd thought Fire Guy was done with this bullshit. Sure enough, though, there's a plume of smoke coming from a little bit away, and Tommy redirects his swinging. The building is just a couple webs away, and it seems like the firefighters are already there. That's good. Tommy can get any civilians in and

out much more safely than usual.

He lands on the roof and swings down into the top floor, relieved when he bumps into a fireman putting out the last of the smaller fires. "Spider-Man," the fireman says, and his voice sounds surprisingly familiar. "Glad to see you. There aren't any civilians left in the building, but we could use your help getting some of the debris cleared. D'you mind?"

Tommy nods, and the firefighter directs him to the stairway. He heads down, and, just like the fireman had said, the stairwell is blocked up by debris. Tommy starts shifting it out of the way, webbing it to the wall so that it won't fall on those trying to clear out the fires, and there are footsteps behind him, probably the fireman again.

"Hey, man, I've almost got the third floor cleared out, should be just another minute," he says, not looking behind him, which, he realizes, is stupid as fuck. A pressure hits the very nape of his neck, and Tommy suppresses a shudder at the cool feel of metal against the suit. Slowly putting his hands up, Tommy turns. "Don't do anything crazy, alright? I've got a family movie night to get to, you don't want me to miss *Moana*, do you?"

The firefighter from before—at least Tommy had been right about that—hums, shoulders shrugging. "Eh. I like *Frozen* more," he says, switching the safety off. Tommy groans as the firefighter lifts the gun to point between his eyes. This might get ugly. The firefighter, probably Fire Guy, chuckles lowly. "Sucks that this is gonna be over so soon. I was looking forward to dragging your death out."

Tommy rolls his eyes. The guy talks a tough game, sure, but Tommy's been shot before. If he jumps to the ceiling in time, the bullet will probably hit him in a non-lethal area. Or he could go the funnier route and distract him. "Am I the Elsa or the Anna in this situation? I feel like I'm Elsa," Tommy says, and the firefighter sputters, clearly confused. Tommy crosses his arms, one hand cupping his chin. "No, yeah, I'm *definitely* Elsa here. I'm about to make you *let it go*."

Not his best work, but he kicks out and knocks the pistol out of Fire

Guy's hands, and the guy groans as Tommy webs it to the floor. Hah! Checkmate, motherfucker. "That's so not funny, that's not even how the movie-fucking *whatever*, Spider-Man, I'll kick your ass anyway," Fire Guy growls, and Tommy has to dodge his fist in order to try and web his foot. Unfortunately for him, he misses, and the guy slices his arm with a knife that *Tommy hadn't seen before, what the fuck?!* As Tommy gets a good jab in at the guy's stomach, he stumbles back and leans into his walkie-talkie. "That arachnid motherfucker's here, put him to sleep!"

Shit. Spore dude. 404. Tommy's gonna be down for the count in less than ten minutes if that shitbag blasts him in the face with a fucking fart cloud of mushrooms like last time. His metabolism works as much magic as it can, but whatever's in that gas is like melatonin on goddamn steroids. But Tommy's gotta get by Fire Guy to get out.

Flinging out a leg to try and sweep the back of Fire Guy's knees, Tommy ducks out of the way as Fire Guy aims another punch at his face. Rude. His face is his best feature. Tommy throws out another punch-another web, too-and misses. How the hell is this guy so *nimble?!* He's built like a brick fucking wall. Tommy wracks his brain for a plan, and it shouldn't be this hard, his brain is usually chock full of inane plans, but he's blanking. The Sense is failing him, not warning at all when Fire Guy punches, meaning Tommy's ribs are pretty bruised already.

Tommy hates it, but he's going to have to listen to the flight half of his fight-or-flight. Taking a deep breath, incredibly pained by the aforementioned bruised ribs, Tommy leaps for the ceiling, sticking a web straight to Fire Guy's face as he dashes away, but he doesn't get far before Fire Guy starts slashing wildly at Tommy's legs as he tries to pry the web off his face.

Dropping down at the top of the landing, Tommy dashes to move back up the steps, groaning as fucking 404 himself appears in the doorway to the top floor. "You have *got* to be kidding me, I'm going to miss *Moana* for this?!" he shouts, immediately whipping webs at 404's gun. Thank fucking God, it jams, and Tommy attaches a web to each side of the stairwell and backs himself up, slingshotting himself to the top and kicking with both feet at 404's chest.

404 topples over like he's made out of cardboard, and Tommy grabs him by the front of his shirt, holding him over the stairs. The spore gun lays discarded at Tommy's feet. "Let go, you *freak*," 404 huffs, craning his neck to look back at Fire Guy, who's still struggling and stumbling with the web on his face. "Blaze, you useless idiot, *help* me!"

"The fuck kind of name is *Blaze*?!" Tommy says, positively bewildered and absolutely entertained. He just tosses 404 down at the guy-Blaze, what a dumb fucking name-and charges up the spore gun before tossing it down at them. "You forgot your gun, fellas!"

The gun positively *explodes* into a cloud of green spores, and Tommy whistles as he starts to head into the next room. God, that felt great. There's no way those fuckers are going anywhere for at *least* a few hours, if the news coverage of the bank heist is to be trusted. But... 404 hadn't been knocked out during the robbery, and the other guy's mask is probably just like 404's if they're working together. *Oh, for fuck's sakes.*

There's a bullet in his already-been-shot-on-a-previous-occasion shoulder.

"I got him," one of the fuckers says, and Tommy is *so* going to lose it if he misses the first twenty minutes of *Moana*. "404, move in, I'm still-my *face* is sticky, man!"

"How the *fuck* is that my fault?! You're supposed to be the muscle, and that spider-fuck toppled you over like it was nothing!" 404 yells back, and Tommy turns around to look down at the two of them. They're shoving at each other on the landing.

Well. Tommy had been right. Looks like they've both got gas masks.

And it appears they're too busy arguing to stop Tommy from ducking out of the building and making his way out. He'd stop them, but... bullet in the shoulder. Also, he's very fond of *Moana*, and Kristin always does this really funny commentary when they're all watching movies that makes Phil do that dumb snort-laugh. By then, even *Techno*'s laughing, and they're all happy enough that Tommy can convince them to watch *Up*.

Tommy relies on his one good arm to propel himself to his typical alleyway. The duffel bag, his saving grace, is still tucked away in its usual corner. Thank fuck for oversized sweaters. It's a pain in the ass to put the sweater on, but at least it's less painful than the last couple of times, since he's been getting used to it. The cuts on his arms and leg do sting, but they typically patch themselves up pretty quickly.

He slings the duffel over his shoulder and starts to head back to the house, making sure Henry's little head is tucked safely into the bag. The walk home is fine; not nearly as many people notice him when he's just Tommy. Which means nobody notices his slight limp as he walks down the street. Tommy's gotta get that under control before he gets home.

When he *does* get home, Tommy closes the door as quietly as possible and tries to tiptoe up the stairs, only to be caught out by Phil, who pauses the *Die Hard* credits and comes over to sweep him into a hug. While Tommy would normally begrudgingly appreciate it, it's really starting to hurt the bullet wound in his shoulder.

"Sorry I'm back so late, I was over at Tubbo's," Tommy says as Phil lets him go, and to his utter surprise, Phil looks incredibly confused, as does Kristin, who's come into the hall.

"Techno said you told him you were at Ranboo's," Phil says, arms crossed, and Tommy mentally screams; he appreciates the cover, even if he doesn't understand it, but now he's got to come up with an excuse.

He rubs the back of his neck sheepishly. "Oh, uh, yeah, we *were* at Ranboo's and then we went over to Tubbo's because Puffy made that really good stew again," he lies through his damn teeth, and Phil nods, patting his shoulder-the good one, thankfully-and returning to the living room with Kristin. "I'll just be a minute! Gotta set my stuff down."

He heads into his room, closes the door, and takes the first aid kit out from under his bed, setting his sweater aside and pulling out the tweezers. He's been through this song and dance often enough to grin and bear it without a gag, but it still hurts like hell. He sanitizes

the tweezers with an alcohol wipe and takes a deep breath as he digs into the wound with the surgical tweezers and starts to pull.

The sick squelching noise is the same every time. Tommy supposes it's probably not normal to be used to pulling bullets out of his, y'know, *body*, but then again, nothing about Tommy's life has ever been normal. Superpowers aside, his family's not exactly your typical British nuclear unit. This whole Spider-Man thing is just the radioactive cherry on a toxic waste sundae. Half the time, it's a wonder the house is still standing.

All this to say, Tommy has gotten very good at distracting himself while cleaning up his alter-ego-induced injuries-it's a necessity. Sighing as the bullet finally comes free with a nauseatingly wet sound, Tommy rolls his shoulder. The wound oozes sluggish blood, and Tommy makes a face. That part never gets any less gross.

Tommy's so absorbed with keeping the bloodied bullet off his sheets while he unwraps another alcohol wipe with one hand to set it on that he doesn't hear the door open. He *does*, however, notice The Sense at the back of his mind, and he snaps his gaze to the now-open door with wide eyes to see Techno standing there, a clean bullet in hand.

The bullet that had previously been under Tommy's pillow.

Techno's gaze falls on the bullet still clenched in the surgical tweezers, then back up at Tommy, shoulders dropping.

Fuck.

"Well," Techno says slowly, "I guess you're *not* a vampire."

In a definitely and totally unexpected turn of events, Techno's the first to find out! I am having so much fun writing this, y'all omg. And your comments are super sweet!! I'll try harder to reply to them, I'm just vvvv busy, but I do read all of them!

nothing worth loving isn't askew

Chapter 10: nothing worth loving isn't askew

Techno's got some mixed feelings, and Wilbur comes home.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“Shut the fuck up and close the door,” Tommy hisses, darting up from his bed and shoving Techno inside, bloodied bullet and tweezers long since forgotten on the carpet. He’ll have to clean that shit up later. He hardly bothers to hold back his strength, and Techno stumbles into the room; he catches himself on Tommy’s desk as Tommy slams the door shut. Tommy rounds on Techno, a single finger pointed in his direction. “You didn’t see jack *shit*, got it?!”

Panic courses through Tommy as Techno looks down at the clean bullet in his hand and then back up. Tommy thinks he looks fucking stupid. Techno’s hand closes around the bullet, and Tommy groans, rushing to pick up the discarded one and wincing when the action proves too strenuous for his steadily bleeding shoulder. To his utter surprise, Techno’s shaky hands shoo him away and take the tweezers and bullet instead.

Still silent, which is freaking the fuck out of Tommy, Techno sets both items down on the desk and nudges Tommy into his desk chair, grabbing the first aid kit from the bed and taking out the peroxide. “The least I can do is patch you up,” Techno mumbles, and Tommy has never heard his brother’s voice tremble like this before. Techno gingerly takes Tommy’s arm and starts to gently disinfect the wound, starting in the middle. The worst part. Techno looks back and forth between each of Tommy’s eyes-which is,

again, unusual, given Techno's distaste for eye contact. "After you're cleaned up, we're gonna talk."

There's no room for argument, and Tommy tries to slump down in his chair. Techno won't let him, grumbling something about how he's gonna make it worse if he doesn't sit still. "Would you believe me if I told you I got mugged?" Tommy asks, a lilt of wary hope to his tone, and Techno affixes him with a flat stare. Ah. No dice.

"I would find it pretty hard to believe Spider-Man got mugged," Techno says, that slight tremble to his voice still there in spite of the sarcasm lacing it. Tommy grimaces. So Techno *knows* knows then.

Techno carefully reaches over to the surgical thread, still keeping pressure on the wound, and Tommy sputters. "Woah, woah, hey, I don't-you don't have to-"

Brow furrowing, Techno picks up the needle and thread anyway, gently taking the peroxide-soaked cloth away from Tommy's shoulder and rubbing numbing cream over the area around the wound. "Tommy, are you tellin' me you've gotten *shot* before and haven't gotten stitches done?" Techno asks flatly, and Tommy gives him a sheepish grin. He hasn't, but that's because he's got no clue how to do them up himself and he's not about to ask Phil to take him to the hospital to get them done there. Techno closes his eyes for a moment, then returns to his meticulous work. "We are havin' the *longest* conversation after this."

"But *must* we, though-ow! *Fuck*, Techno, be careful," Tommy hisses, and Techno stares at him with wide eyes, needle poking through Tommy's skin, which, ew. Tommy has to look away; he can normally handle the gory parts of being a superhero, but this feels... ickier, somehow. Techno glances down at the empty packet of numbing cream, and Tommy sighs. "Right, yeah, so fun fact about the whole superpower thing, my metabolism goes, like, fuckin' *fast*, so unless the meds I'm using are crazy strong, they're pretty much ineffective."

Techno practically wilts, eyes apologetic. "So I can't give you painkillers or anythin' like that, can I?" he asks, but he clearly already knows the answer. Tommy just smiles sadly at him, and he goes back to poking around in Tommy's shoulder with a needle,

looking up in worry at him with every noise of pain that manages to escape.

"It's fine, big man, I'm alright. Been through worse shit, this is nothing," Tommy tells him, but his attempt at consoling Techno seems to have the opposite effect. Instead of relaxing and continuing like Tommy had hoped, Techno whacks him upside the head and looks like a bastardized mix between furious and devastated.

"This isn't *nothing*, this is me stitchin' up my kid brother's *bullet wound* in secret because he's Spider-Man," Techno grumbles, but he returns to the stitches nonetheless, and Tommy just sighs. There's not really much he's going to argue about, not right now, at least. Techno works in the silence that's settled over them, wincing when Tommy does and setting down the needle and thread after a while. "There. I'll take them out for you when you're all healed up. Where else are you hurt?"

Tommy just waves dismissively. "Ah, the other ones aren't bad, it's like nothing, Tech, I heal like you wouldn't *believe*," Tommy says, all false confidence. Truth is, his arms hurt like *fuck* from being slashed by Fire Guy-Blaze, he should really remember that-and his leg feels worse, probably the shallowest of the cuts but the one that stings the most. Techno glares at him, and Tommy groans. "Fuckin' fine, God, I-there's some on my arms and one on my leg, but-! It's not that bad, man, I can get 'em myself."

Crossing his arms, Techno raises a brow, and Tommy kicks at his ankles. He relents, though, because on some level, very begrudgingly, he respects Techno's practical medical knowledge, and maybe also respects him as a person, just a little. "I can't believe you managed to keep this a secret for so long, given your history of ruinin' surprises. How many people know?" Techno asks, and Tommy feigns thinking about it before pointing right at Techno. Nodding, Techno starts to disinfect the gash on Tommy's forearm. "Good. We're keepin' it that way. Now, I don't particularly *approve* of this, but I'm not gonna stop you from bein' Spider-Man."

"You're not?" Tommy asks, embarrassingly hopeful, and he clears his throat and glares at Techno. "I mean-of course you're not, I'd

kick your fuckin' ass if you tried, wouldn't even need superpowers to do it, I would just—"

"Tommy. Stop talkin' and let me patch you up," Techno grits out, more annoyed than he'd just been, and Tommy immediately falls quiet. Techno wraps up the cuts on Tommy's arms and then crouches down to get the one gash on his leg. He sighs as he disinfects it. "I don't want you to stop bein' Spider-Man. Much as I hate that you're... well, pullin' a *Tommy* and puttin' yourself in danger, you're makin' an actual change. I just want you to get *shot* less. Got it?"

Tommy grins, and Techno narrows his eyes. "Aww, Techie, you care," he teases, and Techno presses down harder with the disinfectant, making Tommy hiss in pain. At least Techno looks kind of apologetic. Well, then Techno rolls his eyes and goes back to it, and it's like normal again. "Um, thanks for helping me."

Raising an eyebrow, Techno secures the bandages. "What was I supposed to do, let you get an infection and die? Phil, Wilbur, and Kristin would be sad. Can't have all those mopey people around wantin' to talk about *feelings* when I've got swords to sharpen," he grunts, standing and crossing his arms. Aw, fuck, that's Techno's *I-am-very-serious-listen-up* face. "We're gonna set some ground rules here."

Tommy scoffs as he gets up from his chair, mimicking Techno's stance. "Who the hell d'you think you're talking to, bitch?! You're gonna force *Spider-Man* to follow ground rules?!" Tommy demands, and Techno blinks slowly, unimpressed. Shit. He actually *is* serious. "Alright, fine, but I draw the line at a maximum of three."

"I can work with that," Techno says with an easy grin, and Tommy groans. Techno starts to list them off on his fingers. "Number one, you're gonna text me when you get home so I can come take care of your injuries. You clearly have no idea what you're doin' here, but that's not entirely unexpected, you barely know what you're doin' in general. Number two, you sit through my tutorin' to get your grades up. I need volunteer hours for my scholarship, and you need to do better in school so Wilbur and Phil stop sniffin' around. Number three, you explain the extent of your superpowers and any

developments to me and I can use them for my own purposes in exchange for keepin' this from Phil and Kristin."

"Deal, great, and fine but *only* if my patrols don't suck, I'm not about to sit there and move swords around for you when I've been fuckin' shot or some shit," Tommy says, and Techno shrugs, offering up a hand. Tommy shakes it, and Techno gestures to the bed, presumably for the first half of rule number three. He begrudgingly sits. "Alright, so what do you want to know about my insanely cool and amazing powers?"

Techno rolls his eyes. "I know the basics. Super strength, that weird web stuff, clearly heightened agility, given how high you can jump, and the regeneration and metabolism you mentioned just now," he lists, and Tommy nods. He could get into specifics with those, but time is of the essence here; Tommy *cannot* miss any more of *Moana* than he has to. "So tell me about everything else, if there *is* anything else."

"Well, all my senses are enhanced. Sight, smell, taste, hearing, the whole shebang. All of my powers were really uncontrollable for the first couple of days. You remember, the hallway lights, the migraines, all that shit," Tommy says, and Techno nods. "I've got them mostly under control now, except for The Sense. Sorta this tingle I get at the back of my head that tells me danger's coming, it's super cool. I'm basically psychic, which makes me better than you."

Stifling a snort, Techno glances up at his forehead and back to his face. "A tingle? You've got a Tommy Tingle?" he asks, and Tommy goes bright red, shoving Techno off the bed. He snorts as Techno looks completely surprised; it's not an expression Tommy gets to see often, but it's always priceless. The surprise quickly shifts back into a flat glare, and Tommy offers him a hand back up. When he pulls Techno to his feet with little effort, Techno's brow furrows, and he squeezes Tommy's shoulder. "Your muscles are really tense, man."

Tommy nods. "Oh, yeah, that's because I have to constantly restrain myself lest I accidentally use the full extent of my strength and harm others or injure myself as a result," he explains with ease, and Techno's typical dumb and apathetic face morphs into one of horror.

“What? What the fuck did I say? Why is your face like that? It’s uglier than usual.”

There’s the glare again. “You’re insufferable,” Techno says, and Tommy beams at him. As he turns to put his sweater back on, Tommy hears Techno inhale sharply, and he turns around, raising a brow. “Tommy, your back is... what *happened*?”

Tommy scrabbles his hands over his back in a very cool and not at all goofy way, humming in recognition. “The scars? Ah, they’re no big deal. I’ve been lightly stabbed there a few times, shot there once, and the explosion hit me there after the bank heist,” he explains, pointing to each, and Techno winces. Tommy tosses on his sweater and claps Techno on the shoulder. “C’mon, asshole, let’s go watch *Moana*.”

“Can you tell if they’re putting it on right now with your Tommy Tingle?” Techno asks, and Tommy shoves him.

Wilbur storms into the kitchen at six in the morning-Tommy’s only up because he’s foolishly agreed to study with Techno, which, ew-and he’s clearly very hungover, clothes disheveled and hair ruffled. It only takes about ten seconds for Phil to notice Wilbur’s presence, and he blinks in surprise over the lip of his mug.

“Oh, hey, Wil. Welcome home,” Phil says, and Wilbur flips him off, Phil raising his hands in mock surrender. Wilbur grabs the pot of freshly-made coffee and chugs some, coffee dripping down the sides of his face and chin. Tommy watches him with envy; ever since he’d gotten his powers, the effect caffeine has on him is practically nothing. Phil chuckles. “Have a good time at the teacher’s conference, did you?”

Tommy’s abruptly reminded of the smell of smoke on Wilbur’s breath. Gross. “It was fucking awful,” Wilbur says, voice gravelly. Tommy snickers, chomping away at his bacon, and Wilbur glares at him. “The fuck are *you* laughing at?”

Putting his hands up, Tommy stifles a laugh. “Nothing, nothing, you

just look super stupid right now,” Tommy says, and Techno kicks his shin under the table. Tommy kicks him right back, a little harder. “Anyways, Wil, you look a right mess, how the hell are you gonna teach today?”

“I’m not, dumbass, we’re watching a fucking movie,” Wilbur says, chugging some more coffee before letting Phil usher him into his usual seat at the table. Techno slips a plate over Wilbur’s way, and Tommy steals some of his bacon. Yesterday was exhausting, he deserves proper sustenance, thank you very much. Wilbur’s clearly too out of it to care, though he does smack Tommy’s hand away when he goes back for more. “The conference wasn’t a *total* bust. At least I finally worked up the nerve to talk to Sally.”

“No you didn’t,” Techno says easily, and Tommy chokes on his juice.

Wilbur hangs his head. “No I didn’t,” he admits, and Tommy cackles as Wilbur hides his red face behind the mug Phil passes him. Techno smiles, a rare sight, and Wilbur sighs dejectedly, the melodramatic bastard he is. “I don’t know why I bother lying to you. I almost did, though! I was, like, *super* hopped up on-ah, Kristin, nice of you to join us-anyways, I was *completely* sober and was psyching myself up, but then Niki pulled me onto the dance floor and I lost sight of her.”

Kristin chuckles, clearly only having just woken up, and she ruffles Tommy’s hair as she walks by him towards the kitchen. Phil claps a hand on Wilbur’s shoulder as he sits down next to him, an easy grin on his face. “Don’t lie to your mother, you drunkard,” he says, and Wilbur squawks in offense, only for Phil to shove a scone in his face. “Not gonna get over your hangover unless you eat, Wil.”

“Let him lie, I do *not* wanna know,” Kristin says from the kitchen, and Tommy laughs, finishing up the last of his breakfast. Techno nudges his side, and Tommy groans. It’s too fucking early to be studying. But he *did* agree to Techno’s terms, and Techno’s held true to his end of the bargain so far. Tommy huffs, but he gets out of his seat anyway, ready to follow Techno out. Kristin enters just then, cup of tea in one hand and a plate full of breakfast in the other. “You two are already done? I just got here!”

"Studying," is Techno's very detailed and lengthy explanation, and Tommy rolls his eyes. Techno grabs Tommy's arm and nods his head toward the hallway. Phil and Wilbur exchange a look; Techno's really not good at this. "I'm helpin' Tommy."

Nodding, Tommy snatches his arm back. "This is unfortunately very true," he says, and Wilbur raises an eyebrow. The bastard. Tommy gets an idea, his face lighting up as he turns to Phil; he's a genius, he should win the Nobel Prize, he's the smartest motherfucker to exist. "But if you'd rather we have a nice and wholesome family meal...?"

Phil sighs and shakes his head fondly. "The two of you can study after school's out for Tommy, Tech, come sit with us," he says, and Techno glares at Tommy as he begrudgingly sits back down. Tommy reigns triumphant once again. Phil looks over at Kristin, and Tommy snatches bacon from *him* this time. If Phil sees, he doesn't seem to care. "I'll be going into the office later than usual, d'you need a ride to pick your car up from the shop, love?"

"Oh, that'd be great, thanks," Kristin says, and Tommy gets his hand smacked away by Wilbur, who catches him trying to take more bacon from Phil's plate. He's *starving*, give him a break. He glares at Wilbur but relents; Kristin's looking over at them now. "By the way, Wil, I know you're following that Spider-Man stuff pretty closely, did you see he was active all this weekend?"

Tommy and Techno look at each other. It's actually kind of fun to have someone who can react with him, rather than having to silently stew in the knowledge that his family's talking about him without knowing it's him. Wilbur hums, moving around his eggs with his fork. "I did, kind of disappointed about last night's fight, though," he says, and Tommy's face falls. Wilbur takes a bite of his eggs and gestures with his fork. "Like, I get that there were two of them against him, but to just leave them and let them go free to set more fires? Bit irresponsible, if you ask me."

Gnawing at his bottom lip, Tommy concentrates *very* hard on the table. He *knows* he should've powered through the pain, and Wilbur's right, it *had* been irresponsible to leave 404 and Blaze free. To Tommy's surprise, though, Techno clears his throat. "Wilbur, it's

not like there's anythin' more he could've done, the guy tried his best," Techno says, voice even, and Tommy gives him a sad smile. It's nice that Techno's defending him, really, but he knows Techno would've agreed with Wilbur if he hadn't known that it's Tommy behind the mask.

Wilbur puts his hands up placatingly. "I'm just saying, isn't he supposed to be a superhero? I think he's a good person, sure, but c'mon. Even when he's gotten hurt, it's never stopped him before," he points out, and Tommy shifts uncomfortably in his seat. Wilbur's right, but Techno seems to be getting pissed off. Well, as much as Techno can outwardly show frustration.

Fists clenched at his sides, Techno leans forward. "He was *shot*. I don't know about you, but I can't think of a single person who's successfully fought off two armed criminals while bein' *that* injured," Techno says easily, and Tommy gladly takes the bacon Kristin slips onto his plate from her own. "He made a smart move. Not like the cops had any success in catchin' the guys either."

"Well, the cops are useless bastards anyway," Wilbur dismisses, and Tommy has to admit he's got another great point there. "Besides, Spider-Man's fought people off and been way more injured than just shot."

"Shouldn't that in itself tell you just how dangerous those guys must be?" Techno insists, and yeah, Tommy hadn't exactly wanted to be on the receiving end of the spore gun again, or whatever Blaze has been using to set those fires. Then again, Wilbur's still right. He should've done more, tried harder.

Wilbur scoffs. "This isn't even the first time he's gone off the rails. Don't you remember the bank heist? Somebody died that day because Spider-Man missed him on his way out," he says, like he's talking about the weather, and Tommy starts shaking. Wilbur just keeps going, paying no mind to Phil and Kristin's wary glances, Techno's glare, and Tommy's clear horror. "I mean, he's saved Eret before and helped Niki out, and I'll always be grateful for it, cheers to him, seriously, but... c'mon, Tech. Even *you've* got to admit he's not all that Twitter's hyped him up to be."

Techno slams his hands on the table, and Tommy jumps, eyes darting between his brothers. Wil looks absolutely bewildered-and slightly amused-and Techno looks *furios*. "Wilbur, I'm tellin' you," he says, and Wilbur blinks. "He did as good of a job as he could, and he's the only one brave enough to *do* the damn job."

"Oh, come *on*, it's not bravery, it's all unearned confidence," Wilbur says, amusement lacing his tone, and Tommy sinks a bit lower in his seat. Yeah, maybe he hasn't earned *all* the confidence he's got, but the confidence he *does* have is because he's cool as hell and kicks ass on the daily. Techno's eyes narrow, and Wilbur laughs. "Seriously, Tech, chill out. Not like he gives two fucks about a random citizen's opinion anyway, right?"

Ah. That's always the kicker, isn't it? Nobody filters what they say when they think the person they're talking about isn't around to hear them say it. Tommy knows that all too well; Ranboo's well within his rights to be hesitant, but sometimes that shit-the idea that his *friend* doesn't even trust him-can hurt. Only a little. Tommy's not affected. No sir.

"Boys, calm down," Phil says easily, and Techno leans back in his chair, arms crossed. Phil stifles a laugh as Wilbur and Techno continue to glare at each other. "Maybe we'll make a rule about no Spider-Man talk at the table if this is how it's gonna end every time."

That would make two tables, then.

Kristin swats Phil's arm playfully and smiles. "A little debate is healthy, don't you think?" she jokes, and she hands Tommy another piece of bacon. Techno raises an eyebrow at him-given Tommy's eaten enough bacon to make a whole pig, it's understandable. Tommy just grunts, and Techno frowns. He'll tell him about his weird carnivorous spider preferences later.

"Speaking of debate, I want *no* fights at dinner tonight, I've got some potential clients coming over," Phil says, pointing at each of them, including Kristin, who scoffs. He glares jokingly at her. "They're the ones from *your* New York branch, love, don't lose your job."

Wilbur nods and affixes her with a deadpan expression. "Yes,

otherwise we'll be left without our extravagant lifestyle," he says, and Tommy bursts out laughing. Wilbur puts the back of his hand against his forehead and leans back in his chair so it's almost tipping. "Oh, what would we do without this centuries-old shitty house?"

"Oh no, I hope you don't fall," Techno says, equally flatly, and he gently nudges the bottom of Wilbur's chair. That's all it takes for Wilbur to topple over, sprawled out on the ground. "L. What a tragedy. Taken too soon. Anyways."

Tommy clutches at his side and pounds the table as Wilbur scrambles to stand, looking absolutely pissed. His face is scrunched up, and Tommy grins. "Look, he's even uglier now," he says, and Techno gives him a high-five without looking. They're clearly the superior brothers.

Kristin can't stifle her laughter anymore, and Wilbur turns to her in mock-offense, hand over his heart. "Look at Mumza, laughing at her eldest son's demise," he gasps, and Phil snorts, gesturing over to the pitcher of juice, and Techno passes it over. Wilbur shakes his head. "Wow, I really *am* invisible to you people. I'm a ghost. I'm Ghostbur."

"You're not a ghost, you're a melodramatic little fucker," Phil says.

Wilbur pouts at him, but he sits back down nonetheless. Techno nudges Tommy, and he groans, knowing that he can't worm his way out of studying for much longer. "We oughta get to studyin', Tommy's got a test comin' up soon," Techno says, and Kristin and Phil nod, eerily in sync.

Tommy scowls, but he follows Techno upstairs anyway, hesitating at the door of Techno's workshop. He's normally not allowed in here; apparently there's 'dangerous equipment' and Tommy 'cannot be trusted' around 'open flames' or some shit. Techno leads him in, and it's pretty similar to what Tommy remembers-he hasn't been in here in, like, four months, and the only differences are some newer-looking pieces of equipment and *even more swords*.

"I thought you were going to force me to study..." Tommy asks, raising his eyebrows, and Techno nods towards the towering

bookcase that takes up half a wall. Ah. "Damn, though you were gonna be cool and tell me 'Tommy, you are so great and a bigger man than I ever will be, and now I will help you study the art of the sword because you are simply the world's most amazing superhero.'"

Snorting, Techno tosses a textbook at him, and Tommy fumbles to catch it. Techno crosses his arms, clearly amused, the bastard. "I thought you'd use your Tommy Tingle," he says, and Tommy whacks at his arm with the textbook.

"It's not-! I'm going to stab you if you call it that one more time, it is *not* my fuckin' Tommy Tingle, it is *The Sense*, you bitch," Tommy huffs, and Techno chuckles. Techno sits down in an old-ass leather chair that creaks like Phil's old man joints, and Tommy opens up the textbook. "Gross, why are you making me study literature?"

"Because it's the class you're doin' the worst in, and Wil's gonna have my head if he finds out I haven't helped you out in his class while I'm tutorin' you," Techno says, and his posture seems to tense at the mention of Wilbur, even though he's the one who'd brought him up. Techno looks uneasy, like he's chewing on a food he doesn't like, which is his 'emotion processing' face. "I'm, uh... sorry about breakfast. Wilbur was bein' a dick."

Tommy shrugs. "Not like he was wrong," he says easily, and Techno looks appalled. "What? I *could've* done better. Powered through the pain n' all that shit."

"Okay, why the hell is everyone, including you, forgetting you got *shot?!?*" Techno grumbles, running a hand through his hair. Tommy starts to try and reassure him, but Techno cuts him off, a finger pointing threateningly in his direction. He looks startlingly like Phil. "Don't start. I don't wanna hear about how it happens to you all the time or how you're totally fine."

"Well, what the fuck else do you *want* me to say, Techno?! It *does* happen all the time, and I've dealt with it alone plenty enough to know I'm always fine!" Tommy snaps, because *fuck* Techno for underestimating him. "Honestly, man, it's like you think I can't fend for myself!"

Techno shuts his eyes in exasperation. "I don't think you *can't*, Tommy, I think you *shouldn't*, and I hate that you're makin' me talk about this," he says, and Tommy scoffs. "I don't like talkin' about how I feel, or how you puttin' yourself in danger makes me get all upset 'cuz that's my kid brother out there, and I can't do anything about it. D'you have *any* idea how terrifyin' it is to watch back robberies and muggings that 'Spider-Man' has stopped?"

"So why are you watching?! How did this become about you?! *I'm* the one getting shot at, *I'm* the one who decides what *I* get to do with *my* abilities, and you're making this about how oh-so-fucking-worried you are," Tommy says, and Techno starts to argue, but he cuts him off mid-sentence. He doesn't want to hear whatever bullshit Techno's about to spew at him. "You know what? Maybe this little 'ground rules' arrangement isn't gonna work out. Just don't tell anyone else, I'll mind my business and handle things alone, just like I've been for the past few months, and you don't have to worry about it."

"Tommy, you're not listenin' to me," Techno says, brows furrowed, and Tommy rolls his eyes. If he gets another stunted attempt at Techno expressing his emotions, he might have to stab *himself* with a sword. "I'm not tryin' to make this about me, and... I'm *sorry* that I did. I'm just-if it were Tubbo, wouldn't you be worried?"

"If it were Tubbo, he'd be using his powers to cause chaos, not fight crime," Tommy answers, trying very hard not to lean into the weirdly genuine conversation Techno's trying to have. He's not used to this; he wants things to go back to normal. He wants Techno to go back to not-so-jokingly accusing him of being a vampire, exchanging a few pleasantries at family meals with him every once in a while, teaming up occasionally to take the piss out of Wilbur. But, Tommy supposes, accidentally revealing that you're a superhero can really change an interpersonal dynamic. "Thanks for worrying, I guess. I hate this, by the way."

Techno snorts. "You think *I'm* happy about tellin' you how I'm feelin'? It's the worst. I wanna go back to threatenin' you with mild terrorism," he says, and Tommy smiles. There it is. Techno nods at the textbook Tommy's still holding and pulls up a stool. "C'mere, let me try and explain the plot of *Les Mis* in terms a five-year-old would

understand.”

“Oh, *fuck you*-”

“Shut up and read about Jean Valjean,” Techno interrupts, jabbing a finger at the textbook, and Tommy sticks his tongue out at him.

It’s nice getting along with Techno, in all honesty. They’ve never been terribly close, and, granted, the Spider-Man secret probably isn’t the best way to facilitate ‘brotherly bonding’ or whatever, but Tommy remembers a good few Christmases where he’d managed to talk circles around Techno while being paired up to make paper garlands of snowflakes, and this has the same sort of energy to it.

Tommy focuses more on the reading, because if he’s honest with himself, nostalgia from the past isn’t exactly going to help him pass Wilbur’s class. Techno points something out every so often-some symbolism here, a little foreshadowing there, and Tommy’s pretty much breezing through the section of the book in Techno’s textbook in no time.

After another half an hour of reading, reluctantly listening to Techno, and being generally bored out of his mind, Tommy’s phone buzzes.

we’re outside!!!!

Tommy drops the textbook, much to Techno’s chagrin, and he waves as he dashes out of Techno’s workshop, grabs his schoolbag, and heads out the door. Sure enough, Tubbo and Ranboo are waiting on his doorstep, and Tommy grins.

“Ow do, fellas?”

Wilbur: “Yeah, I don’t know if I like Spider-Man all that much anymore.”

Techno: So you have chosen... death.

do ants experience conscious thought?

Chapter 11: do ants experience conscious thought?

A change in staff, an old gaming system, and some good old brotherly bonding.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“So... why exactly are we being stuffed into the auditorium?” Ranboo asks, and Tubbo shrugs. To be fair, Tommy’s got no clue either. They’d just been told to gather their things and head down, something about an announcement. Tommy hadn’t *really* been paying attention-evidently, even if he had, he’d still be as lost as Ranboo and Tubbo are right now.

Tubbo nudges his side. “Hey, did you guys want to come over to mine after school? Puffy got me an old gaming system from the thrift store, I wanna see if I can corrupt the system files,” he says, and Ranboo shakes his head in exasperation. Tommy gives him a fist bump.

As much as he’d love to bear witness to Tubbo fucking up source code to hell and back, Tommy’s got his daily patrol. “I dunno if I can make it, man,” he says, and Tubbo’s brow furrows. Thank fuck for Phil’s job. “Phil’s got some fancy fellas from his boring ass job coming for dinner, we’re supposed to make a ‘good first impression’ or whatever.”

“Why’s Phil letting *you* attend the dinner if he’s trying to make a good first impression?” Ranboo asks, an eyebrow raised, and Tommy reaches across Tubbo to shove his head. Dick. He’s about to say something really clever and witty that will absolutely *devastate* Ranboo, but Ranboo shushes him as the crowded

auditorium quiets down. "Don't get us in trouble, man."

As their temporary headteacher takes the stage, Tubbo leans towards Tommy. "You've been busy almost every day for the past couple months, can't you just leave my house before dinner at yours starts?" he whispers, and Tommy begrudgingly admits to himself that he *has* been leaving his friends in the lurch lately.

After a moment of deliberation, in which Tommy comes to terms with the fact that he actually kind of does miss hanging out with Tubbo and Ranboo, he nods. He can skip patrol for one day; what could possibly happen if he takes a day off? Tubbo grins at him, and Tommy rolls his eyes fondly as he turns to properly face the front. Of course Tubbo's excited about hanging out today, he's such a clingy bastard.

"Good morning, students and faculty," Quackity says, shoulders squared out and chest puffed up. The guy exudes confidence, not to mention he's actually been pretty cool in the time he's stepped in for their previous headteacher. "As you all may know, the previous head had to, ah, *step down*, for lack of a better term, after he'd been arrested. Since that time, I've been appointed to temporarily take over, but I'm happy to announce that I'll be your new, *permanent* headteacher!"

A smattering of applause rings throughout the auditorium, and Quackity waves dismissively-what a modest guy-until it falls quiet. "That's great, Big Q's so cool!" Tubbo whispers, and Ranboo nods eagerly. Tommy's not complaining, either, given that Quackity has let him get away with so many unexcused absences.

Quackity grins easily and lets his hands fall to grip the podium. "Seeing as the rest of the temporary staff appointments have fallen through, I wanted to hold this assembly to let you all meet *my* faculty, who you'll all have to be listening to. Not too closely, though," he says with a wink, and Tommy laughs politely along with the rest of his peers. Quackity gestures to his right, and a man with a goofy smile and neon green suspenders-him and Quackity are kind of matching, now that Tommy thinks about it-steps forward, arms behind his back. "This is your new deputy headteacher, Charlie SI-"

"You guys can just call me Charlie, I don't mind!" the deputy head interrupts, leaning into the mic. Quackity looks slightly annoyed, but the tension in his shoulders quickly disappears as the crowd laughs. Tommy's laughing too, this new deputy head seems *much* more fun than the temporary one. Charlie glances at Quackity, then back at the audience, then back at Quackity again, all in ridiculously quick succession. "Oh! My bad, go on!"

With a sigh, Quackity gestures to his left, and two men step up. "These two will be your assistant headteachers. The ginger's not important," he says, receiving both laughs from the students and a glare from said ginger, "and the man next to him is Karl Jacobs. He's the one you'll *actually* have to listen to."

Mr. Jacobs gives the students an enthusiastic wave. Tommy glances around the stage to see if he can spot Wilbur. Sure enough, as Quackity drones on about something or another, Wilbur's seated amongst the rest of the teachers, glaring daggers at the headteacher's back. Tommy can see Ms. Saumon, too, and he's surprised to find her giving the ginger Quackity had called unimportant a sympathetic grimace.

"Tommy, pay attention," Tubbo hisses quietly, and Tommy jumps in his seat, blinking. Nothing interesting is happening on the stage, but Tubbo seems intent on him listening anyway, for some reason. "If you get detention, you can't come over, dumbass."

That, Tommy grants, is true.

Unfortunately, the announcements are boring as hell, and Tommy's about ready to slam his head in a wall just to feel something again. The ginger on the stage seems to be staring very intensely at him, which is less boring, and Tommy straightens out of his slouch. The guy moves onto another target, and Tommy nearly scoffs. What a dickhead.

In any case, Tommy will have to tread lightly for a while now that the school's gone and hired new teachers. The temporary replacements hadn't really given much of a shit what Tommy had done, so long as he hadn't actively caused trouble within school grounds. He's got no clue how perceptive these new guys are, or how seriously they'll

take their jobs.

“... in any case, it’s my honor to be your official headteacher,” Quackity says, arms thrown wide, and Tommy claps along with the rest of the students. It’s uproarious applause; everybody loves Big Q. “Alright, alright, I know you’re excited, but quiet down, your teachers will take you back to your classes. I can’t interrupt your education *too* much or the board will have my head.”

The teachers start to file out from the stage, each one of them raising a hand to signal to their respective classes, and Tommy groans. Ranboo pats his back sympathetically as Tubbo tugs them both by the wrist over to where Ms. Saumon is waving. She’s pretty tall, so it’s easy to see her fiery hair over the top of the heads of the student body.

“Ah, hello, you lot,” she says, ruffling Tubbo’s hair, and Ranboo waves nervously. Evidently, they’re the first of their class to gather. Ms. Saumon lights up as she turns to Tommy, big muscly arms crossed. “Oi, Tommy! How’s my star athlete doing?”

Tommy gives her a grin that reads more like a grimace and a thumbs-up. He’d made the initial terrible mistake of using his powers in gym, and Ms. Saumon had interpreted his super-strength as Tommy being in shape. Which, given the whole superhero thing, he is, but he doesn’t exactly want to work *hard* in *gym*. That shit sucks.

Ms. Saumon glances around as some more of their class gathers, her gaze lingering on one particular spot in the crowd more than once. Tommy follows her line of sight and is incredibly unamused to see Wilbur’s head of messy hair above everyone, ludicrously tall motherfucker that he is. Damn. Tommy knows what he’s got to do now.

Tugging on the sleeve of Ms. Saumon’s athletic shirt, Tommy looks blankly up at her as she meets his eye. “My brother has lots of money and is great with women,” he says, and Tubbo elbows him *hard* in his side. Tommy ignores him, noting the way that Ms. Saumon’s cheeks flush as she stares at him, bewildered. “Also, I guarantee he would melt into a puddle of goo if you talked to him, and that would be funny, I think.”

"Tommy!" Ranboo reprimands, shooting Ms. Saumon an apologetic glance. Tommy honestly doesn't think he's done anything wrong; if Wilbur stops moping about his inability to talk to women-if he gets to *date* one-maybe he'll be less of an asshole about Tommy's grades. In any case, Ranboo's still distressed. "You can't just say that to a teacher!"

"I mean, technically speaking, I already have," Tommy says, and Tubbo smacks him upside the head. "C'mon, man, I'm just-"

"Shutting up. You're just shutting up," Tubbo says.

Tommy supposes he's shutting up, then.

As it turns out, Tubbo makes *very* quick work of corrupting the old console.

Such quick work, in fact, that Ranboo barely gets to move his character before the entire screen goes to shit. Tommy cackles as Tubbo laughs maniacally, and Ranboo hangs his head, face cradled in his hands. "See! I *told* you I could make it happen in less than four seconds," Tubbo says, and Tommy holds his hands up in surrender.

"Alright, alright, I will admit defeat just this once, but you better savor it, Tubbo, it's never happening again," Tommy says, and Tubbo just grins, pulling his laptop into his lap and tapping wildly at the keys for, like, the fourth time this afternoon. "Hey, Ranboob, hand me my Coke."

"Stop calling me that," Ranboo says as he hands over the can, but there's no real heat behind it; there never is. Tubbo snickers, and Tommy takes a big swig of his soda. Ranboo munches on some popcorn and restarts the system when Tubbo gestures for him to. "What are you up to *now*, Tubbo?"

Tubbo barely looks up from his screen. "I'm trying to see if I can corrupt the code even faster. I want to get it to completely fuck up the second it gets booted up," he explains, and Ranboo shakes his head. Tommy's honestly kind of interested, even if he doesn't know

jack shit about the actual processes Tubbo's using for this. "Alright, Tommy, power it on."

Reaching over to turn the system on with the hand not occupied by the soda he's currently chugging the last of, Tommy watches in awe as the startup screen starts to glitch and make that *brrrr* noise that means it's not processing the sound correctly. Tubbo whoops and claps once, fists raised victoriously in the air.

"Damn, Tubs, that took you barely any time," Tommy says, and Tubbo grins deviously, returning back to his laptop screen. "That's gotta be a world record or some shit."

"Oh, it is, I've already submitted it to six different forums," Tubbo tells him, and Ranboo groans, sinking down against the side of Tubbo's bed. Tommy throws his legs across Ranboo's lap, much to his chagrin, and leans back against Tubbo, who's still in his desk chair. Huffing out a quiet laugh, Tubbo reaches down to ruffle Tommy's hair. "Clingy."

Tommy scoffs. "I fuckin' am not, shut up," he grumbles, making grabby-hands at the bag of crisps Ranboo's got, only to get a blank stare in return. Tommy tilts his head back in exasperation, and Tubbo smacks his forehead lightly.

This is actually kinda nice, even despite his lack of crisps. "Do you guys ever wonder if ants are capable of conscious thought?" Tubbo asks, still focused on his laptop, and Tommy and Ranboo turn to stare at him. He keeps typing for a moment, then seems to realize that no one's answered him yet, and he looks up. "Well?"

"I mean, theoretically, they *could*..." Ranboo says, tilting his head in thought, and Tommy kicks at his thigh. Ranboo grabs his ankle and tosses Tommy's leg off of his lap. "They probably think things through more than Tommy does, conscious thought or not."

"Oh *fuck* you, boob boy, I think *everything* through!" Tommy insists, and Tubbo snorts. When Tommy goes to tell him off as well, Tubbo sticks his hand in Tommy's hair and gently scratches, and holy *fuck* that's really nice.

Tubbo chuckles quietly as Tommy leans into the touch, and Ranboo blinks. "Wow, I can't believe you found his off button," Ranboo says, and Tommy flips him off, eyes closed in contentment.

Eventually, Tubbo does pull his hand away and goes back to typing, and Tommy frowns despite himself. "By the way, are you guys gonna go to the carnival?" Tubbo asks, and Tommy's brows furrow in confusion. The fuck is Tubbo on about now? Tubbo glares at him, as does Ranboo, and Tommy throws his hands in the air in surrender. "This is why I told you to pay attention when Big Q was giving that speech, dumbass. They're doing a fundraiser on Halloween, it's gonna be pretty huge."

"When the fuck did he say that?!" Tommy demands, and Ranboo throws the now-empty bag of crisps at him.

"Probably sometime in between you zoning out and you telling Ms. Saumon that your brother has 'lots of money and is good with women,'" Ranboo says, pitching his voice lower and doing a stupid impression of Tommy at the end there. Tommy scowls at him. Shaking his head, Ranboo sits up properly. "Seriously, I can't believe you actually said that to her."

"I can," Tubbo says, not looking up from his screen, and Tommy elbows his shin.

Arms crossed, Tommy rolls his eyes and shifts to sit up with his legs crossed rather than splayed out. "Well *excuse* me for wanting my brother to be happy," he says, and Ranboo raises a brow, clearly not believing him. Tommy groans. "Ugh, fine, I'm just hoping he shuts the fuck up about it. Happy?"

"Not necessarily, but fair enough," Ranboo says, and Tubbo snickers. Tommy's phone buzzes, and he gives Ranboo a pleading look. It's on the bed, within reaching distance for Ranboo, and Tommy really doesn't feel like getting up. Alas, Ranboo is giving him no slack. "Your legs work just fine, Tommy."

Tommy shakes his head. "They're broken, for your information," he says, and Tubbo bonks him on the head with his laptop. "What is it with you and smacking me around today, Big T?"

"I'm like a goat, I bonk out of affection," Tubbo says simply, and Tommy huffs out a laugh; his friends are so fucking weird. It's great. Tubbo leans over him to grab his phone and hand it to him, and Tommy grins triumphantly at Ranboo, who scoffs. "Who's texting you?"

"It's just Techno," Tommy says with a frown, and Tubbo hums.

phil wants to know where you are.

i'm at tubbos wtf do u want

he's not looking over my shoulder, you can tell me if you're on patrol.

no i'm literally at tubbos dude

oh okay, on my way to pick you up then.

ew why

because phil has people coming for dinner. did you not listen this morning.

fuck off yes i did but it's so early don't pick me up yet

bruh.

you say this as if i want to. see you in 5.

Tommy groans, and Tubbo shuts his laptop. "Are you leaving already?" he asks, and there's a weird edge to his voice. Tommy nods, shrugging. Tubbo crosses his arms, though Tommy's honestly got no clue why he's pissed. "Seriously, man? You're ditching us again?!"

"Woah, what the fuck do you *mean*, 'again,' Tubbo? It's not like I'm itching to go to Phil's stupid fuckin' dinner party," Tommy says, and Tubbo just shakes his head, slumping back into his desk chair. Tommy turns to Ranboo, who immediately goes pale at the mere whiff of confrontation, per usual. "Fuck's *his* deal?"

"I mean... you *have* been kind of distant lately," Ranboo says gently, and Tommy doesn't take very well to being handled with kiddie gloves. For fuck's sakes, if Tubbo'd had a problem with him, why hadn't he said anything earlier?! Ranboo shifts uncomfortably and runs a hand through his hair. "And you keep cancelling on us, man."

Well, Tommy can't exactly help it. But it's not as though he can tell them he'd gotten stabbed the day he'd promised to go to the arcade with them, or that he'd been shot when he'd said he'd go see that one movie Ranboo had wanted to see, or *any* Spider-Man stuff that's stopped him from hanging out with his friends.

At Tommy's hesitation, Tubbo just shoves his backpack at him. "Just go, man," Tubbo says, and Tommy *wants* to apologize properly, really, he does, but there's honking coming from outside, and Tommy doesn't exactly want to piss off the one person protecting his secret identity.

"I'll see you guys soon," he mumbles, shoulders tense as he leaves Tubbo's room and heads down the stairs. He waves goodbye to Puffy, who's flipping off Techno-who hasn't stopped honking-from the living room window, and ducks out the door. He drops into the passenger seat in a not-at-all-melodramatic fashion and only fastens his seatbelt after Techno pointedly refuses to drive off until he does. "Thanks for the ride, prick."

"What's got you all bummed today?" Techno asks, an eyebrow raised, and Tommy wonders if he can rip the little pig bobblehead off the dash and throw it-he's probably stronger than superglue is. Techno blinks at him before facing the road properly and heading down the street. Tommy thinks Techno drives like a grandma. His fingers drum anxiously on the wheel. "Alright, so we're not talkin' about it, good to know."

Tommy slumps down in his seat as the car rolls slowly down the road. He hates fighting with Tubbo. It's not usually his own fault-because, after all, Tommy is amazing and can do no wrong-but this time... it kind of is. Then again, Tommy can't exactly put his duties as Spider-Man on hold because Tubbo's feelings are hurt. And this time it isn't even *because* of his superhero stuff! This time it's out of his control completely!

Clearing his throat awkwardly, Techno reaches behind them to the backseat as they come to a stop by a stop sign, and he tosses a bag of fast food into Tommy's lap. "The fuck is this?" Tommy asks, peeking in. It's not, as he'd initially expected, filled with trash, but instead piled high with food. "Oh *shit*, you got me food?"

"I got you *meat*," Techno specifies, and Tommy takes out four burgers and two ten-packs of nuggets. His mouth is legitimately watering; this is like heaven for him—even The Sense is jumping for joy. Tommy immediately starts to devour the first burger, making a face at the lettuce and tomato, but the burger itself is so good he doesn't care much. Techno snorts and turns back to the road. "I figured that with your bacon thing from earlier paired with your metabolism, you could probably use a bite to eat."

"I owe you m'fuck'n life," Tommy says through a mouthful of burger. Techno chuckles and turns down their street, and Tommy stuffs some nuggets in his face. God, this shit is so good. Phil's been on a health kick lately, meaning most of their family meals have consisted of vegetables and starch. Today's breakfast had been a fluke.

Techno starts to pass the house, and when Tommy makes a confused noise around the assortment of fast food, Techno makes a face. "I'm givin' you time to finish. Slow down, I just cleaned my car and if you choke on your food, you'll get crumbs and stuff all over it," he grumbles, and Tommy rolls his eyes. Techno and his stupid car. "So... is the protein kick, like, a spider thing? I've been readin' up on tarantulas n' stuff."

Shrugging, Tommy finishes up the last of the burgers and starts really working on the chicken nuggets. "Pro'lly," he says, and Techno makes another face. "Whu'tcha researchin' for?"

"I just... it'd be good to know more about spiders, just in case," Techno says, and Tommy looks over to see his cheeks flush.

Tommy grins, and he takes a pause from his food. "Techie, are you *worried* about me?" he jokes, and Techno slows the car down to take one hand off the wheel, snatch the rest of Tommy's chicken nuggets, and dump them out of the driver's side window. "Fuck you! You know what, dickhead, that's *your* money you're wasting

anyway.”

Tilting his head, Techno hums. “Worth it,” he says, and Tommy rolls his eyes. Techno rounds another corner and glances over, gnawing on his bottom lip. “So, uh, sorry about pickin’ you up early. I can give you and your friends a ride on Monday, if you want. One of my professors cancelled class, so I’ve got all of that morning off.”

“Why are you being so *nice* to me?” Tommy asks instead of accepting or declining the offer, and Techno sighs, fingers still anxiously drumming on the wheel as they turn again. Clicking his tongue, Tommy gestures towards the road. “Seriously, man, there’s nobody else in the fuckin’ street, at *least* go the speed limit.”

“I’m only goin’ one under, *man*, relax,” Techno shoots back, but he speeds up slightly anyway, and Tommy grins, victorious. “And I’m... I’m bein’ nice because you’ve got a lot on your plate right now. Figure if I can make it easier for you, I should.”

Shifting in his seat, Tommy glances out the window. “Thanks, then, I guess,” he says, and Techno hums. They’re approaching the house again. As Techno pulls into the driveway-and he spends at least two minutes trying to park perfectly, because of course he fucking does-Tommy glances back over. “Techno, you’re a good big brother. And if you tell anyone I said that, I will web you to the side of a skyscraper.”

“Noted,” Techno says, but he doesn’t stop smiling, even after he unlocks the door and lets them both in. Cupping his hands around his mouth, Techno clears his throat. “I’ve successfully brought back the child!”

Tommy smacks his arm.

Phil comes stumbling out of the kitchen, shoulders slumping in relief. “Good, good, both of you go get dressed,” he says, brushing off something that’s either flour, which is likely, or cocaine, which is unlikely, but infinitely cooler, off of the frilly pink *Kiss me, I’m a crow* apron that Wilbur had ordered custom-made for Father’s Day one year. When Techno gives him an amused look, Phil whacks him lightly on the arm with a spatula. “I know what I look like, alright? I

actually care about these fuckers' opinions, so go on, get upstairs. When they get here, *please* act like we're a functioning, normal family. Just for tonight."

Scowling, Tommy mocks Phil under his breath. He's caught out pretty easily by Kristin, who puts a hand on his shoulder and smiles in amusement. "D'you have a minute, Tommy? I wanted to have an actual talk with you, yeah? We didn't really get in-depth over the phone," she says, and Tommy panics. He'd thought she'd forgotten about that.

Thank fucking God, Techno steps in. "Ah, actually, I got that covered," he says, a hand rubbing at the back of his neck, and Tommy gives him a grateful smile. Kristin blinks in surprise, and then narrows her eyes, clearly skeptical. "Yeah, no, me n' Tommy had a really long talk about what's been goin' on with him. I've got it covered, Mom, don't worry about it."

Kristin smiles softly and cups Techno's cheek in her hand. "Thank you," she says, and Tommy snorts. Of course Techno had played the 'Mom' card. It's pretty much a failsafe way to get Kristin to believe him, given he hardly ever calls her that. Kristin ruffles Tommy's hair and starts towards the kitchen. "I'm gonna go calm your father down before his old man heart gives out."

"I heard that!" Phil shouts, which is followed by a loud *clang* and a flurry of swears.

Nodding towards the stairs, Techno stifles a laugh, and Tommy follows him up. "Go get Wilbur when you need to tie your tie," Techno says, and he disappears into his room before Tommy can start to tell him off. Tommy's a big man, he doesn't need *Wilbur* to tie his tie for him. He can tie a tie just fine, thank you.

Alas.

It quickly becomes apparent that Tommy does not, in fact, know how to do it.

He ends up knocking on Wilbur's door with his nice red tie in one big clump, and Wilbur bursts into a scream-laugh as soon as he opens

the door. "Don't *laugh* at me, fuckface, *fix this*," Tommy says, almost as red as his tie with embarrassment, and Wilbur has to lean on the wall to support himself, positively wheezing. "*Wilbur!* C'mon, Wil, just fix it for me, I don't wanna look stupid!"

"Well, it's too late for *that*, but come here, I'll fix it," Wilbur says once he's composed himself enough to actually stand. Tommy begrudgingly steps further into the room, and Wilbur grabs the ends of the tie and starts to detangle them. "Alright, so you cross it here, and-well, then you do the-ah, *shit*, here, take the tie off, I'll do it on myself and then put it on you and tighten it, I can't tie it mirrored."

Tommy hands it over, and Wilbur makes quick work of tying a knot that probably has one of those stupid fancy names. He takes it off and puts it on Tommy, tucking it underneath his collar and tightening the narrow side of the tie until it's snug enough that Tommy doesn't *quite* feel like he's choking, but it's close.

"So why the hell do we have to be all dressed up? And why the hell are these fuckers coming over so early?" Tommy asks, trying to smack Wilbur's hands away as he reaches to fix Tommy's mess of curls. "Fuck off, I'm fine!"

"You own a comb, I don't know why you let it get so bad," Wilbur laments, pushing his stupid glasses up. Tommy thinks they make him look quite like an owl. "But we're apparently supposed to behave because it's a 'business dinner party,' meaning everyone involved is going to be stuffy and boring, and we're not allowed to flick food at each other."

"This blows," Tommy huffs, finally relenting and letting Wilbur make his hair somewhat manageable.

"Tell me about it," Wilbur says, "I have to pretend like you're not the most annoying motherfucker in the world for who knows how long."

Tommy shoves at his shoulder. "Shut the fuck up, Wil, at least I haven't got-

"Boys! Come down and greet our guests," Phil calls from downstairs, and Tommy glares at Wilbur before sprinting to get to the door first.

They fight silently, whisper-yelling at each other and shoving, before Techno yanks them both out by the collar and glares. Sheepishly grinning, Tommy and Wilbur straighten up and follow Techno down the stairs. Phil glances over from the dining room doorway. "Ah, there you three are. These are my sons, Wilbur, Techno, and Tommy. Boys, these are the clients I was telling you about."

The Sense *screams* in the back of Tommy's mind, and he unconsciously reaches out to grab Techno's wrist tightly. The businessman in the middle steps forward, a mask covering most of his face. "Nice to finally meet you all, I've heard so much about you," he says.

He extends a hand to Wilbur first, then Techno, then Tommy, who hesitates to let go of Techno, but shakes it anyway. The Sense is still setting off alarm bells, and Techno glances down at him, brows furrowed as Tommy's grip on his wrist returns and tightens.

"Pleasure to meet you as well, ah...?" Wilbur says, ever the fucking charmer, and the man in the middle chuckles lightly.

"I'm Dream," he says, eyes crinkled at the edges, like he's smiling, "and these are my associates, Sapnap and George."

Phil, your clients are setting off Tommy's superpowered danger sense, Phil they're so suspicious, please, Phil-

dinner party from hell

Chapter 12: dinner party from hell

A dinner party with three mysterious businessmen who set off your superpowered danger sense? What could possibly go wrong?

HOLY SHIT!!! Thank you guys so much for 300 kudos, that's absolutely insane! :D

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Apparently, and Tommy hadn't known this before tonight, business dinners involve a mind-numbing amount of mingling.

He sticks close to Techno in the living room as the guests—mainly Dream, sometimes Sapnap, and seriously, what kind of name is Sapnap?—talk to the rest of his family. Techno leans down just a bit and frowns slightly. “What’s got you so on edge?” he mumbles, and Tommy lets go of his wrist. Ah. It’s probably going to bruise. Tommy had been so distracted by The Sense that he hasn’t exactly been on top of restraining his strength.

“Just nervous. Got a weird *feeling*,” Tommy answers quietly, and Techno nods. He’s clearly not getting it. “No, Techno, like... a *feeling* feeling.”

“Yes, your Tommy Tingle, I gathered,” Techno tells him in a flat voice, smiling politely as George glances over at them. Tommy almost laughs at how strained it looks. But he elbows Techno subtly,

because it's not his fucking *Tommy Tingle*, it's The Sense, for fuck's sakes, and he fidgets with his tie. "So... is it just uneasy or is it serious?"

Tommy glances over at Dream, who's shoulders shake with laughter as Phil offers him a drink and he declines, and The Sense sends a shiver down his spine. "Pretty serious, big man," he murmurs, happily taking the can of Coke that Kristin offers him. Techno nods and sips on his wine, eyeing the three businessmen warily. Tommy leans a bit closer. "I'm also pretty sure I've seen these fuckers before. Few months ago, at this ice cream pla-"

"What are you two whispering about over there? Come join us, we don't bite," Sapnap says with the air of someone who very likely *does* bite. Tommy gives him a tense smile and clutches Techno's wrist again as they both get closer to the conversation. "How old are you, kid, like, thirteen? Is that why you're not drinking?"

"I'm seventeen, actually," Tommy says through gritted teeth, unconsciously shifting slightly behind Techno, who nudges him. Right, Phil wants them to make a good impression. He can't chew this fucker out. Though, his statement about Tommy not drinking has him wondering; with his increased metabolism, would alcohol even do anything? "So... you work with Ph-my dad? Or...?"

George raises a brow, and Dream leans back in his seat. Tommy thinks he looks like a prick, ankle crossed over his knee and tie coming undone. They'd all made such an effort, and this dickhead is just making himself right at home. "Technically speaking, your dad works *for* us," he says, and Tommy is very tempted to punch him. Dream reaches over to tap Kristin on the arm; Tommy almost lurches forward to stop him. "Can you show me to the restroom?"

She nods and leads him off down the hall, and Sapnap slides over to take his spot, eyes narrowed as he leans forward. "Haven't I seen you around before, kid?" he asks, and Tommy's grip on Techno's wrist tightens. He sees Techno's eye twitch minutely in his peripheral vision and abruptly lets go, shaking his head. Sapnap shrugs.

"So... does our dad also work for you?" Techno asks, and Tommy

tries not to laugh at the face Techno makes when Sapnap grins and nods. “Hm. That’s... nice.”

“And what are you studying, Tech?” Sapnap says, and Techno immediately stiffens; ooh, yikes, this guy clearly doesn’t know-hardly anyone outside of their family is allowed to shorten Techno’s name like that. “I’m assuming it’s something sports and fitness related. Your old man told us all about how you won your last fencing tournament.”

Suppressing a shudder, Tommy takes another sip of his Coke. Something about Phil divulging details of their personal lives to these guys doesn’t sit right with The Sense. He knows, logically, that Phil’s probably just talking about his family with some coworkers, but these fuckers have him so on edge, Tommy’s hands are shaking.

Techno runs his free hand through his hair. “Nah, I’m an English major. Greek studies minor,” he says, and Sapnap blinks in surprise. Techno just sips on his wine and shares a look with Tommy. “Fencin’ is more of a hobby.”

“Damn, what a waste,” Sapnap jokes, but it doesn’t land well. Nobody’s laughing. Well, except for Wilbur, but he’s laughing at something Phil’s just said to him and George. Wilbur doesn’t count. Sapnap clears his throat. “So, uh, got any pets?”

They both shake their heads. “We’re not allowed to have any. Not after the Milo Incident,” Techno says, and Wilbur whips his head up to glare at him. Tommy holds back a laugh, and Sapnap looks between the two of them, clearly interested in an explanation. Techno doesn’t bother to give him one, instead barreling on to a different topic. “Have you ever read Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*?”

Visibly confused, Sapnap shakes his head. He gives the two of them a wary look before moving to the other end of the couch and joining the other conversation. Tommy gives Techno a fist bump. “Nice one,” he mumbles, and Techno inclines his wine glass slightly. Techno’s social awkwardness comes in handy sometimes. Tommy sighs. “God, this is fucking boring. When are we gonna sit down and eat?”

"No clue," Techno mutters, snorting as Wilbur starts gesturing grandly, Sapnap and George clearly enraptured with whatever fabulously embellished story he's telling them. Tommy very subtly and not at *all* obviously reaches for Techno's wineglass while he's distracted, but alas, Techno's reflexes are on par with his own, and thus, Tommy doesn't get to test his alcohol hypothesis.

"He's all bells and whistles, huh?" Dream says from behind the two of them, and Tommy jumps like he's been shocked, whipping around to look at him. Techno puts a hand on his shoulder, and Tommy grins nervously. Chuckling, Dream tilts his head. "Well, *somebody's* jumpy."

Tommy laughs, and it sounds *painfully* panicked, even to himself. "He's on edge because he watched a horror movie earlier, like a moron," Techno covers for him smoothly, and Tommy's shoulders fall in relief. While he doesn't appreciate the insinuation that he'd be afraid of some movie-Tommy's a big man, he's scared of *nothing*, Techno-he *is* grateful for Techno's quick thinking. "So, what're you working on with Ph-Dad?"

It's funny seeing Techno play into the Typical Suburban Family thing they're attempting to pull off. Dream's eyebrows raise. "Oh, he hasn't told you? Well, we *had* been working on two separate projects-the one we're doing solely with our company is confidential, of course-but now we've got our preliminary testing for the other project mostly out of the way, so we're able to focus on this one for a while. Your dad and his company are responsible for building the majority of our new headquarters in London," Dream says, and Tommy narrows his eyes.

Phil works for an architectural firm-The Craft-and Kristin works for a medical or science research supply something-or-other, Tommy's never really understood the intricacies of her work. Why the fuck would they need a new headquarters? There's one here already, Kristin goes there whenever she's not overseas.

"I thought you already had a base of operations here," Techno says, and Tommy nods, glancing over to the couch, where Wilbur's newest story has Phil shaking his head. "Kr-our mom works for your company, it's, like, a ten minute commute from here, isn't it?"

Waving dismissively, Dream hums. "Well, it makes sense that you'd think so, but Kristin's fairly low ranking," he says, and Tommy *really* wants to punch this guy. Kristin's a hard worker *and* she's in charge of international shit, who the fuck does Dream think he's talking about?! "Sapnap, George, and I are all higher up on the chain of command. We're having a new headquarters built just for our top-ranking employees for confidentiality purposes."

That sounds like bullshit to Tommy, but then again, he doesn't know jack shit about office jobs or whatever. "Well, congrats on getting a new office," he says, and Dream nods, clearly grinning under the mask, and Tommy thinks that for a guy whose face is mostly covered, Dream sure does have a punchable one. Phil calls Dream over, and Tommy glares at his retreating back, gritting his teeth. "This guy's a fuckin' prick, Tech. He's a wrong'un, I can *sense* it."

"Yeah, well, get your Tommy Tingle in check, it's gonna look weird if you're one loud noise away from jumpin' out the nearest window the entire time we're eating," Techno grumbles, and Tommy elbows him for his use of that stupid fucking name again. "We should go talk to them, it'll be suspicious if we stick together."

"You just want to get rid of me," Tommy accuses, but he heads over to where everyone's talking anyway, standing by Kristin, who throws her arm around his shoulders. That puts Tommy much more at ease; he knows, logically, that nothing's going to happen to him at a fucking dinner party, but The Sense doesn't seem to be getting the memo. "So... what're we talking about? Catch me up, yeah?"

"Wilbur was just telling them the mud story," Kristin says, and Tommy goes bright red. She laughs and ruffles his hair, dropping her arm back by her side again. "Aw, don't be embarrassed, Toms, it's a cute story!"

"It's the *worst* story," Tommy huffs, and Wilbur rolls his eyes.

He turns back to the rest of the guests, much to Tommy's chagrin. "Anyways, Tommy's just sitting in the backyard, hands absolutely *filled* with his little mud pies, and I'm trying to get him to drop them and come back inside since it's about to storm, but of course, he doesn't listen to *me*, so-so I go get Mum," Wilbur says, trying not to

laugh, and Tommy steps on his toes. "And she comes out, and Tommy *lights up* like a goddamn *Christmas tree*. He's throwing all the mud in the air-and I need you to imagine it, because I was standing there on the back deck and this little six-year-old dumbass, my tiny, stupid baby brother, gets *so* excited to see his mummy that he throws what's gotta be a kilo of mud pies into the air, and they *all come crashing down on him*."

Dream positively wheezes, Sapnap leaning on him for support as he cackles, and even *George* is laughing. Tommy's shoulders go up by his ears, and Kristin pinches his cheek; the story isn't even over yet. "Tell 'em what happens next, Wil," Phil says through his laughter, and Wilbur bursts out into a laugh.

"Oh my God, okay so-! So Mumza over here is, like, frantically trying to get Tommy to stop crying, he's covered-it's like *head to toe* in mud, just absolutely-he's crying, and Mum's also trying not to get any mud on her dress because she's got a meeting in, like, an hour, and she starts to lead him back inside," Wilbur says, and Tommy tries to manifest the piano in Wilbur's music room upstairs crashing through the ceiling and dropping directly onto his head so he can die a quick and painless death; it'd be better than *this*. "And then Tommy slips on a bit of mud that hadn't landed on him and absolutely *eats it* on the pavement."

"And *that's* how he lost his first tooth," Phil adds, and Kristin tries her best to stifle her laughter behind her hand, which Tommy appreciates, even if it doesn't really work. His face feels hot as everyone has a good laugh at his poor younger self's expense, and Techno claps him on the shoulder sympathetically. Phil sips his wine. "But to be fair, it wasn't nearly as bad of a cleanup as when Wil had his sand-eating phase."

Ah, vindication.

Wilbur sputters, cheeks flushed. "Wh-it was not a *phase*, I only ate sand *once*," he protests, arms crossed, and their guests are still snickering.

"Yeah, because Mom and Dad caught you sneakin' it in every other time you tried," Techno says flatly, and Tommy bursts out laughing.

Sapnap looks to Techno, bewildered, and he nods. "Seriously, it was a legitimate problem, we kept findin' loose sand everywhere for *months*. It was like comin' back from a beach vacation, but without the vacation."

Kristin shakes her head. "I would wake up with sand in my hair sometimes," she muses, and Wilbur scowls. "Y'know, it'd have been less weird and more cute if you hadn't insisted you could 'commune with the sand eaters' every time we tried to convince you that nobody else eats sand."

Tommy nearly chokes on his Coke. "Did you *really*?" he asks, incredulous, and Wilbur glares at him, opening his mouth to say something, but the kitchen timer dings, which subsequently distracts just about everybody. "S't time to eat?"

Nodding, Phil heads into the kitchen, and Dream adjusts his mask as he turns to Kristin. "I won't be eating tonight, I hope you understand," he says, and Tommy's brow furrows as Kristin easily waves the weird-ass statement off.

"Who the fuck goes to a dinner party and doesn't eat anything?" Tommy wonders aloud before his brain can catch up with his mouth, and he slaps a hand over his face, eyes wide. He'd been doing so well, too! *Shit*, Phil's gonna be so mad.

Everyone's staring. Ah, fuck.

Then Techno bursts out laughing, and Tommy huffs out a nervous chuckle, still glancing around nervously. Wilbur and Kristin exchange a glance before laughing quietly, and Dream's shoulders shake with silent laughter, Sapnap and George clearly stifling their own. Oh, thank fucking God, this is salvageable.

"I know that you're probably just joking, but if you actually do want to know, I never take my mask off in front of other people," Dream says once the laughter's quieted down, and Tommy makes a face.

"You a germaphobe or something, big man?" he asks, and Dream makes an 'eh' sort of motion with his hand. Nodding wisely, Tommy grins. "Just chronically ugly then, eh?"

Wilbur whacks Tommy's arm. "Tommy, you can't *say that*," he hisses, already turning to apologize to Dream, who waves dismissively.

"No need," he says easily, tilting his head in curiosity at Tommy as Phil comes into the room again, and Tommy catches a whiff of something *absolutely fucking delectable* from the kitchen, holy shit. "Your kid's pretty funny, Phil."

"Who, Tommy? Yeah, I guess he is when he's not being a little shit," Phil says, ruffling Tommy's hair, and Tommy swats his hands away. Phil claps his hands together and gestures towards the dining room. "Right, shall we go eat?"

Steak.

Delicious, incredible, juicy steak.

That's what Phil had made for the dinner party.

Tommy doesn't even really register the conversation going on around him, he's only got eyes for the heaping serving of sirloin on each plate. His mouth is watering at the smell; Techno nudges him, but Tommy's too busy trying not to weep at the glorious sight of everything he could ever want condensed onto one plate. He wonders whether he should savor it or eat as much as he can as *fast* as he can. After all, if there are seconds, he wants to be the first to get them.

"Dude, you look like you're about to pounce on the table," Sapnap says, snapping Tommy out of his steak trance, and Tommy's face flushes with embarrassment. Alright, yeah, maybe Tommy's leaning over a bit, but no need to point it out. Sapnap glances over at Phil, jerking a thumb in Tommy's direction. "You feed this kid, Phil?"

"Apparently not enough," Phil says, brows raised in amusement, and Tommy scowls at him as everyone starts to take their seats. Phil's pulled out the fancy plates for tonight; these are the ones that Tommy 'isn't allowed to touch' because he'll 'break them' or

something. Phil starts to pass around the basket of rolls-Tommy knows for a fact that those definitely come from a can-and smiles brightly. "Everyone go ahead and dig in!"

Tommy immediately goes for the steak, hesitating every now and then to make sure he's not cutting it hard enough that his superstrength makes the knife go through the plate. Thankfully, no one pays him any mind, much too occupied by their own dinners to really make note of the way Tommy's hovering over his plate like a feral animal.

Techno discreetly slides half of his own steak onto Tommy's plate as Wilbur passes George the serving bowl of salad, pointedly refusing to acknowledge Tommy's look of immense gratitude towards the gesture. Techno's sympathetic side is really making a rare appearance today, as it would seem.

Dream, however, *does* take note of the interaction. "You two must be pretty close, hm?" he asks, cheek perched on his hand, clearly amused. Phil and Kristin exchange a look as Wilbur snorts in disbelief. Their other guests lean forward, clearly interested.

"Oh, yeah, me n' Tech are just the closest. Absolutely the best of pals-Dad, is there any more steak?" Tommy asks, and Phil shakes his head. What a shame.

"Is there a favorite brother, then?" Sapnap asks, taking a swig of beer and grinning. Tommy narrows his eyes and Wilbur gives him a very pointed look. Techno just sits back and shifts uncomfortably. "Which one is it, Tommy?"

Tommy looks over at Wilbur; all at once, he recalls every low grade, every failed assignment, every time he's been called on and not known the answer, all from the past few weeks alone, and he hums. "It's Wilbur," he says easily, "since Techno's forcing me to study with him."

"I am forcin' *nothing*, you asked *me* to tutor you," Techno says, clearly not shaken, and Tommy beams at him. Kristin sighs fondly and passes Sapnap the basket of rolls. They're going pretty quick, Tommy should probably jump on that. Techno clears his throat. "So,

uh, you guys are pretty young for business moguls.”

“Yeah, your parents must be really proud,” Phil says, smiling, and Tommy piles some mashed potatoes on his plate. He hopes Phil had at least used Techno’s recipe for them; nobody can cook potatoes like Techno can.

Dream just shrugs. “Wouldn’t know if she was,” he says, and if Tommy hadn’t known better, he’d say that Dream sounds a bit bitter under that bullshit confidence and nonchalance of his. “I haven’t spoken to my mother in years.”

Everyone goes quiet. Phil makes a choked sort of sound in the back of his throat, and he swallows *way* too much water before saying anything else. “I’m so sorry, mate, didn’t mean to—I really hadn’t meant to bring up any sore subjects,” he says, and Dream waves him off.

Seriously, there’s no way that *Dream* is this guy’s actual name. Tommy doesn’t know why it bothers him, but it does.

“No need for apologies, you couldn’t have known,” Dream says, and while Phil seems relieved, The Sense is very much unsettled by Dream’s scarily even tone. Tommy unconsciously clutches at the tablecloth, and Techno elbows him. Ah, shit, his hand’s stuck. Dream leans back in his seat and turns towards George. “About that little, ah, *test run*, did you get the report in?”

“Of course I did, I’m not an idiot,” George says, rolling his eyes, the first real sentence he’s said all night, and The Sense sends a shiver so violent down Tommy’s spine that his chair creaks with the force of it.

Everyone turns to look at him, and Tommy grins nervously. “Sorry, just a bit chilly,” he says, and Techno’s brow furrows. Tommy shoots him a look to mean *I am a big man, I got this*, which Techno wrongly interprets as panic—and Tommy never panics, he’s never panicked in his life, thanks. Techno goes to say something, but Tommy leans forward to cut him off, hand still stuck to the tablecloth. “How are you all liking the city?”

Sapnap makes a face. "It blows. Super crowded, polluted as hell, and you can't even get around unless you ask someone for directions, because every maps app out there has no idea what they're doing," he grunts. So he hates London. Tommy can sympathize with that to some degree, at least. Smiling slightly, Sapnap gestures towards his companions with his fork. "Y'know, funny story, actually, we were trying to get back to the office from a client's place and we ended up getting the complete wrong directions, we ended up at an-oh, *shit!* That's where I've seen you before! The ice cream shop kid that yelled at us!"

"The one you threatened with violence?" George asks, and Sapnap nods eagerly, the two of them completely oblivious to Kristin and Phil's twin concerned expressions, and Tommy sinks lower in his seat, trying his hardest to think of Henry waiting patiently on his desk upstairs to subdue his increasing anxiety. George nods, finally noticing the concern, and he waves dismissively. "To be fair, he was rude to us first."

"Wh-! They were being disruptive!" Tommy protests, finally unsticking his hand from the tablecloth, and Phil buries his head in his hands. Tommy turns to Kristin, gesturing vaguely towards the three men. "I was just trying to be *mindful*, Mum, surely you understand."

She pats his shoulder, clearly stifling a laugh. "Sure I do, Toms," she says, and Tommy rolls his eyes as Wilbur kicks his ankle under the table. Kristin takes a long sip of wine, then turns to Sapnap. "So, are we still on for the company softball game?"

"Oh, *hell* yeah we are," he says with a grin, and George groans, tipping his head back to stare at the ceiling. Sapnap regards Wilbur, Techno, Tommy, and Phil, eyes wide. "Guys, she's an actual fucking *beast* on the field."

"Actually, you two can't make it this year," Dream interjects, giving both George and Sapnap a stern look. Tommy just keeps eating. As Sapnap starts to protest, Dream holds up a hand, eyes narrowed. "I don't wanna hear it. You already *know* why."

George picks at his potatoes. "Yeah, well, it's stupid. Can't we just-I

dunno-take that week off or something? Do we *have* to keep working on the, uh, project?" he asks, and Dream narrows his eyes. Shoulders shrugged up by his ears, George looks away. "*Alright*, I get it. God."

Kristin smiles at him sympathetically. "We'll miss you guys," she says, and Sapnap snorts, rolling his eyes.

"More like they'll miss *me*. George always sleeps through half the game," he says, and George leans over Dream to shove at him. Tommy's quite amused, honestly; these guys act like brothers.

"That's enough out of both of you," Dream says firmly, and the table falls into uncomfortable silence.

Tommy glances over at the rest of his family, not at all surprised to find Wilbur making that stupid face he does whenever he's trying to blend into the background. Phil seems more stressed than out of place, as opposed to Techno, who looks so uncomfortable, hunched over in his chair to make himself seem as small as possible, that it'd be funny in any other situation.

Tommy polishes off the last of his food, and Dream's gaze snaps to him as soon as his fork *clinks* lightly against the porcelain. "Uh oh," Tommy mutters, and Techno stabs at his salad much more forcefully than necessary.

"Tommy, could I talk to you for a minute about this... work dilemma I'm having? You seem like the kind of guy that would give me an honest answer," Dream says, and Tommy glances over at Phil, who nods encouragingly. Ah, shit. Phil is *so* going to owe him after this.

Shrugging as he stands, Tommy follows Dream into the living room. "What's up, big man?" he asks, relatively at ease until The Sense makes him shudder, *hard*, as Dream shuts the door behind them. His thoughts cycle through just about every curse he knows, and Tommy wraps his arms around himself, slouching back towards the opposite wall.

As if he can sense Tommy's nerves, Dream puts his hands up and chuckles. "Don't worry, I genuinely *did* just want your advice.

Nothing bad, I promise,” he says, and while Tommy would be very happy to believe him, The Sense insists that Dream is a *liar*. “See, I’ve been encountering this... problem... with our other company project. To be entirely honest, we *do* have to run some more preliminary tests. In the meantime, we’re trying to get something back from a... client of ours. But this client is, ah, *difficult*. As someone who also seems difficult-for lack of a better word-how do you think I should deal with this?”

“Why aren’t you asking my dad? Or my mum? They’d give you way better answers, probably, they’ve actually had jobs n’ shit,” Tommy says, and Dream sighs.

“Well, I *would*, but they both seem to have a much better temperament for these kinds of people than I do. And to be honest, I don’t think either of them are particularly... equipped to answer this,” Dream explains, and Tommy hums. That’s fair; Phil’s got the patience of a goddamned saint, and Kristin probably doesn’t know-or maybe isn’t allowed to know-about the project, given what Dream had said earlier.

Frowning in thought, Tommy cups his chin with his hand. “If it were me,” he starts, and Dream nods eagerly, “I would probably just bug them until they give back whatever they have. But if *that’s* not an option, then you should take a minute to check up on stuff. Like, contract loopholes or some shit, I dunno how business works, but-it can’t hurt to outsmart whoever’s pissing you off, big man. Makes beating them at their own game much more satisfying.”

Dream’s eyes crinkle at the edges. Tommy suspects he’s said the right thing. “Tommy, you and I think a lot alike, you know that?” he asks, and The Sense almost makes his fucking knees buckle with the force of the *fear* he suddenly feels. Dream’s hand clasps his shoulder, and Tommy starts trembling involuntarily. “Thanks, Tommy. You’re a smart kid.”

“Course I am,” he says, cursing the way his voice quivers in bone-deep terror, and Dream leans away again, hands at his sides. “Did you, uh... need anything else?”

“Actually, I’d *love* your honest opinion on something else,” Dream

says, and Tommy nods, completely ready to be done with this conversation. Dream looks down his nose at him, even though he's only *just* taller than Tommy. It's irritating. "Do you think your dad is good enough to work with us?"

Oh, *fuck* this guy. Tommy tries his best not to erupt into absolute fury, if only for Phil's sake. "I think you'll find no one better for the job," he says through gritted teeth. Dream tilts his head, as if considering this, before he nods, easily leaning back. "Can we go back now? I still want to eat dessert, y'know."

At that, Dream lets out a surprised laugh, and he heads over to the door to hold it open. The Sense thrums in warning continuously, even when Tommy's back with the others.

His superpowers seem to *really* hate this guy.

Also!! I saw a comment wondering if Dream's mask covers his entire face and I wanted to elaborate a little! Dream's mask only covers his face from below his eyes.

what are you asking me?

Chapter 13: what are you asking me?

A small peek into Tubbo's (definitely ordinary and not at all weird) life.

Tubbo chapter Tubbo chapter Tubbo chapter

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Tubbo's had a very nice and Tommy-free weekend, for the most part. There *are* a few unanswered texts, which, granted, he *could* be a bit nicer about, considering Tommy just wants someone to proofread his code for Sam's class, but he's still pissed off. And he's got a good *reason* to be pissed off as well. Honestly, Tubbo would have been much more understanding had Tommy given him any warning whatsoever every time he'd ditched their plans, but the most he's ever gotten is texts apologizing at ungodly hours of the morning.

But, since Tommy's been leaving him and Ranboo in the lurch, Tubbo supposes it's only fair to unofficially uninvite Tommy from hanging out until he gets his shit together. Until then, Tubbo is going to mind his business, tend to his Twitter account, and study for his chemistry test, because chemistry is a pain in his ass.

Puffy's in the shop right now-between that and her going to finish her clinical hours, Tubbo's been home alone more often than not. He heads downstairs to grab something to eat, not really surprised

to see a pre-made meal with a note on it reading: *Pop this in the oven at 180 for about ten minutes if you need dinner! Love, Aunt Puffy.* Tubbo smiles and sets the oven to preheat.

While Tubbo would much rather just grab something from the pantry to mindlessly chomp on, he knows that Puffy gets worried if he's not eating proper meals. It's sweet, really, even if it means that Tubbo burns his hand on the oven rack like twice a week.

He's checking his mentions as he waits for the telltale *beep* from the oven when the doorbell rings. And rings again. Tubbo's brow furrows; he's not expecting anyone over, maybe Puffy had forgotten her key. He checks through the peephole just in case, only to be thwarted by the giant ghost Puffy hangs on the front door every October. Damn. Well, if he gets murdered, so be it.

Tubbo is decidedly *not* murdered when he opens the door, but this might be worse.

Tommy's standing on the front stoop, eyes wide like he hadn't actually expected Tubbo to open the door. "Uh, hi," he says, and Tubbo narrows his eyes. He'd be surprised at the fact Tommy's got the nerve to show up after being a total prick, but Tommy's audacity has always had a history of exceeding Tubbo's expectations. He's learned to not question it by now.

"What do you want?" Tubbo asks, voice flat, and Tommy shifts uncomfortably. He's holding something, and Tubbo leans back as Tommy abruptly shoves it in his face. It's a gift basket, full of snacks, sweets, and energy drinks. Tubbo takes it gingerly. He doesn't entirely trust that it's not secretly a confetti cannon or some shit.

"Kristin helped me put it together," Tommy explains, sheepishly rubbing the back of his neck, and Tubbo stops holding the thing like it's going to explode. Tommy looks down at him, shoulders slouched. "Sorry for being a bit of a dickhead recently. Shit's been... I'm not gonna lie, Tubbo, my life is a bit of a hellhole right now. But that's not really an excuse for being a shit friend. I hate flaking on you, and I wish I could give you a better explanation, but I can't. I'm sorry, man."

Tubbo sighs. This happens a lot. Tommy will fuck up, Tubbo will internalize it until he finally lets out how much it actually bothers him- usually after Tommy's fucked up a bunch more- Tommy will give him a half-assed, or occasionally truly genuine apology, and Tubbo always accepts it. There's no point in questioning the cycle; it's been like this since they were kids.

"It's whatever," he says, and Tommy crosses his arms.

"No, man, it's not whatever. I fucked up. More than usual, I mean. You don't have to, like, steamroll your emotions and let me get away with my bullshit," Tommy says. "I was a proper prick to you and Ranboo, and I've already apologized to him, so..."

Tubbo rolls his eyes. "Guess I'm next on your apology tour, then," he says, and Tommy groans, running a hand through his hair. What fucking right does *Tommy* have to be annoyed with him?! "No, Tommy, don't act like you're the only person this is frustrating for! I've been ditched by you constantly! And don't think I haven't noticed you never actually show up when you say you're 'coming after me,' you don't give a shit about me going to Spider-Man fights, it's just another excuse for you to bail."

Brows furrowed, Tommy takes a step back. "Wh-Tubbo, that's not true, I *do* care," he says, and Tubbo just sets the gift basket down in the entryway and starts to shut the door. Tommy slams one hand on the door to keep it open, and despite Tubbo's best efforts, it remains that way. He wonders when the fuck Tommy had gotten stronger than him. "Seriously, Tubbo... can we talk?"

"I guess I have no choice now that you're holding my front door hostage," Tubbo says, relenting and letting Tommy in. The oven beeps, and he gestures for Tommy to stay there while he goes to put Puffy's pre-prepared meal in. Dusting off his hands, Tubbo finds Tommy draped across the couch dramatically. "You look like a prick."

"I *feel* like a prick," Tommy tells him. Good. Tubbo thinks he absolutely should. He whacks Tommy's forehead, and Tommy sits up properly, scowling. Tubbo just stares at him, utterly unimpressed. This apology isn't winning any awards as far as he's concerned.

"Listen, Big T, I really *am* sorry. And before you start, I get why you're upset. I've been flaky and super shitty about showing up, I know, alright? Techno also pointed out-yes, I complained to Techno, I'm a dumbass, so sue me-he pointed out that you probably felt like shit every time Ranboo and I told you that you shouldn't be trying to convince Spider-Man that you should do his tech, so... I flagged him down the last time I saw him and asked him to reconsider."

Tubbo's eyes go wide. There's no fucking way Tommy did that. "You didn't," he accuses immediately, because if Tommy actually *had* managed to convince Spider-Man that Tubbo should be making his tech, that could change Tubbo's entire fucking life.

Grinning, Tommy nods. "I did! And I showed him some of the stuff you've done over the years, and he said he could definitely use the help of a big man like you," he says, and Tubbo's face falls. So this is a joke. This is absolutely a joke, and Tommy is an asshole. To his surprise, though, Tommy doesn't burst into laughter, instead immediately scrambling to correct himself. "He didn't *actually* say 'big man,' I said that, but he-the message was the same, he said he'd find you and talk to you whenever he's not busy. I *swear* I'm not making it up, Tubbo, I-"

"Did he really say yes?" Tubbo interrupts, voice hushed. There's no way Tommy had somehow convinced Spider-Man to give Tubbo a shot, not when Tubbo's been trying to convince the guy since the first time he'd gotten to talk to him.

There's something about Tommy's expression, something Tubbo doesn't really have a name for, but he nods, smiling. "Yeah, Big T, he said he would, so he's gonna," Tommy says, and Tubbo lets out a shaky laugh in disbelief. Leave it to Tommy to annoy the crap out of a superhero until they listen to what he has to say. Tommy grins. "You're gonna help a *superhero*, Tubbo!"

Whooping, Tubbo throws his hands in the air. "Holy *shit*, thank you, bossman!" he says, and Tommy just waves him off. "How long did you have to pester him to get him to agree?"

"Oh, not very long," Tommy says, laughing quietly to himself like he's just told a joke, but Tubbo doesn't really get what it's supposed

to be. "He said he'll swing by sometime tonight. Enough about that, Big T, how've you *been*? I haven't gotten to talk to you since Friday."

Tubbo's too buzzed with excitement about the fact he's *living his actual fucking dream, holy shit*, but he supposes Tommy's more than made up for his transgressions. "I've been alright! I had a weird, like, nightmare the other night, but other than that, I've just been out and about with Ranboo," he says easily, pulling out his phone to open up Twitter. However, when the cursor blinks up at him, he hesitates.

Should he say he's going to be working alongside Spider-Man? No, that'd probably be a stupid idea. It's like Spider-Man had said that first day, anyone who works with him could be in potential danger. Tubbo bites back a grin. Spider-Man must be so impressed with his work; whichever project Tommy had shown him *must* be kickass if it'd made Spider-Man reevaluate taking him on as a tech guy.

"What was your nightmare about?" Tommy asks, snapping Tubbo out of his thoughts, and Tubbo blinks in confusion. Tommy's face goes red-ha, he's embarrassed-and he runs his hand through his hair. "I'm only asking because I had a weird dream recently too, so maybe it's your fault, bitch."

Snorting, Tubbo shoves his arm. "Well, if you *must* know, I was, like, in this cage thing? It didn't have a ceiling, it was just these big wooden beams all around me, right? And then there was this guy staring down at me-he was *huge*, it was nuts. And then, get this, bossman, he was choking me out," Tubbo says, and Tommy's eyes go wide. He's not sure why Tommy's surprised; Tubbo has weird dreams all the time. "I know, right?! And then someone, like, busted down the door right before I passed out, and I couldn't tell who it was, but they kinda sounded familiar. Then I woke up. Anyways, what was your dream like?"

Tommy blinks at him. "Right. Uh, I came downstairs and there were the three dudes from Kristin's work that are working with Phil-long story, boring as fuck, Tubbo, don't ask-except the weirdo, Dream, he was staring, like, *right at me*," Tommy says, and while Tubbo has a sneaking suspicion that Tommy's leaving something out, he doesn't care enough about the weird nightmare to pry.

"Huh. Well, enough about dreams-not the guy you mentioned, though what kind of name is *that*, dude?-I still can't believe you got me the chance to work with Spider-Man!" Tubbo says, and Tommy smiles, even though it looks more like a grimace. "God, man, I really owe you one."

"No, you do *not*, this is just part one of Big Man Tommy's Apology Mission. Part two is giving you a ride tomorrow in Techno's fancy car," Tommy says, and Tubbo rolls his eyes, pushing Tommy's shoulder. Tommy shifts in his seat. Tubbo tilts his head. It's not like Tommy to be so nervous. "I might not be able to hang out properly for a while-well, suppose you won't be able to either, with your new sidekick gig-so I wanted to make sure we were still cool before I leave to go get lectured about allegorical story components by Techno."

Tubbo's brow furrows. "You're *still* not doing well in Wilbur's class?" he asks, and Tommy flips him off. Tubbo chuckles, placing his hand on Tommy's head, surprised as Tommy leans into the touch. "Are you doing okay? Mentally, I mean, usually you tell me to get the fuck off of you."

"Shut the fuck up," Tommy mumbles, burying his face in his hands. Tubbo doesn't really know what to do here, so he withdraws his hand and awkwardly fiddles with a stray thread on the arm of the sofa. Tommy leans back against the cushions and smiles weakly. "Things have been hard for me these past couple months, Tubbo. I don't really know where to go from here."

That's an unusually emotionally open thing for Tommy to say. Tubbo tries to alleviate the tension. "You could always blow something up in your backyard. That's what I do when I need to let off some steam," he suggests, only mostly joking, and Tommy seems to deflate a little. Tubbo's got no clue what he's done wrong. "Or you could talk to someone...?"

Gnawing at his bottom lip, Tommy seems to really think for a moment before getting up and stretching, an easy-and *definitely* fake, Tubbo knows his best friend-smile on his face. "Nah, I'm just fucking with you," he says, and Tubbo probably shouldn't pry. If Tommy hasn't talked about it by now, he'll only withdraw more if

Tubbo tries to coax it out of him. Tommy gives him a hearty pat on the back and starts towards the door. "Later, man."

"Oh, uh, okay. Good luck with Techno's tutoring," Tubbo says, and Tommy gives him a two-fingered salute as he ducks out the front door.

Well, that was odd.

Tubbo's got chem homework to do, though, so he just takes his dinner out of the oven, plates some for himself, and heads back upstairs.

Puffy gets home as Tubbo finishes putting the last of the leftovers in tupperware, and she slumps down in her usual armchair, hair and clothes a mess. Tubbo frowns; she's always so stressed out, managing both the shop and her clinical hours on top of taking care of him. Sometimes Tubbo wonders if her life would've been easier had he not grown up living with her, but Puffy always tells him that she wouldn't have changed how things had worked out for the world.

So Tubbo does little things around the house to try and help her out where he can. His room is never *too* untidy, the kitchen is always squeaky clean, and he always starts up the kettle as soon as he hears her car pull up in the drive. The place has been much quieter ever since Foolish had moved out for college, and Tubbo knows that Puffy can't stand to sit in silence for too long.

Neither can he, honestly, so Tubbo hands Puffy her usual evening tea and then moves over to the record player in the corner of the living room. He sets up Puffy's favorite record to play and then moves to sit across from her on the couch. "Thanks for the tea, kiddo," she says, and Tubbo nods, brows furrowing at the dark circles under her eyes.

"Have you ever thought about asking someone else to man the store?" he asks, and Puffy shrugs, setting down her mug on the little table next to her. "Well, I know Ranboo's looking for some part-time stuff. Maybe he could take the after-school shift and you could have

that extra time for your clinical hours. You could even be home in time for dinner!”

Puffy smiles sadly and runs a hand through her hair. “You’re such a thoughtful kid, Tubbo, but I don’t know. I’ve never left the store with anyone other than Niki, and after she finished with school, well... now she’s your math teacher,” she says, and Tubbo huffs out a laugh. Puffy clears her throat and shakes her head. “Enough about me, don’t trouble yourself with my well-being so much, alright? You just focus on being a kid.”

“Will do, Aunt P,” Tubbo says, and Puffy’s smile turns gentle and content as she takes another sip of tea. He wonders if he should tell *her* about the Spider-Man thing; at the very least, Puffy deserves to know he’s spending his time doing something potentially dangerous. “So, um, Tommy was over earlier today, and-”

“Oh, are you two cool again?” Puffy asks, and Tubbo nods. She grins. “That’s a relief. Phil’s been pretty worried about him lately, I’m glad you’ve got his back. He’s a good kid.”

Tubbo snorts. “Yeah, a ‘good kid’ who cons his parents into giving him twice the pocket money by telling them the other one hasn’t given him any yet,” he says, and Puffy snickers. Tubbo really registers what she’s said, then blinks in surprise. “You and Phil have been talking again? Like, properly? Not just to talk shit about Tommy’s and my grades?”

“We never *stopped*, he just got busy with the firm, and I got busy with going back to school,” she says, taking a rather evasive sip of her tea. Tubbo narrows his eyes, and Puffy relents, shoulders slumping. “Alright, *maybe* we stopped being, like, actual friends for a little bit because of how busy we were, but we’re good now. I think so, anyway. How are you doin’, kiddo?”

Kicking the stand that the record player’s on when it gets to the part of the record that always skips-it goes *night-night-night* over and over-Tubbo leans back against the couch. “I’m alright. Been having these creepy-ass nightmares, but I’m sleeping fine, so they don’t really matter,” he says, and Puffy’s brows furrow as she frowns in concern. “No, really, they’re just unsettling, not too bad. When’s

Foolish coming to visit?"

That's always a surefire way to distract Puffy. She positively lights up. "He'll be here for Halloween, and then he's flying in again during his Thanksgiving break," she says, and Tubbo grins. It's fun when Foolish manages to get in from the States; even though he's a good bit older than Tubbo, they're still pretty close. "God, it really *has* been a while. It feels like he left for the semester, like, years ago."

"Bleh, quit being sentimental, the guy we're talking about literally forgot his boarding pass was in his suitcase and made us drive half an hour back just to *barely* make it to his plane on time. I thought I was gonna have a heart attack," Tubbo says, and Puffy chuckles. "Oh, by the way, there's this carnival fundraiser my school's doing, tickets are, like, twenty pounds, I think."

Puffy's shoulders slump a little, but she starts to dig through her bag anyway. "Uh, I think I've got it here," she says, and Tubbo rubs his arm. He normally would just get Tommy or Ranboo to buy him a ticket, but Tommy's just done him a huge favor already, and Ranboo's *definitely* gonna be pissed whenever he inevitably finds out that Tubbo's going to work with Spider-Man. Puffy brightens and hands him a crisp note. "Here you go! When's this thing happening?"

"Uh, well it's actually Halloween weekend. Like, *on* Halloween," Tubbo says, and Puffy blinks in surprise. Tubbo grins nervously. "Maybe you, me, and Foolish could all go together...? I mean, I'm probably gonna hang out with Ranboo for a bit of it, 'cuz he said he might go, but for the rest of it, it'd be fun to do, like, carnival games with you guys. Foolish is really good at that one game with the bottles! The one where you gotta knock 'em down."

Smiling gently, Puffy stands and stretches before ruffling his hair. "Sure, bud, I don't see why not," she says, and Tubbo grins, ready to thank her before her phone rings. Puffy goes positively pale as she looks down at the number, and Tubbo's brows furrow. She clears her throat and runs a hand through her hair. "Tubs, why don't you head up to your room?"

He nods, not wanting to contribute to whatever's stressing her out,

and goes upstairs, pausing at the top of the stairway. Puffy throws her phone onto the couch and slumps into her armchair, face buried in her hands. Tubbo's never seen her so upset. She probably doesn't *want* him to see her like this, either, and he hesitates; should he go comfort her, or would that just contribute to whatever she's stressing about?

It's probably none of his business.

Spider-Man knocks on Tubbo's bedroom window less than an hour later, and Tubbo springs out of his desk chair, hurrying to let him in. He's completely awestruck-this is the *second* time Spider-Man's been in his room! Clambering in a little less than gracefully, Spider-Man stretches above his head and then crosses his arms.

"So, I hear you're looking to be my tech guy," he says, and this is so fucking cool, Tubbo might actually die. He nods eagerly, and Spider-Man laughs. "Great! Your friend-what was his name again? Tom? Cool dude. Definitely not annoying whatsoever, totally convincing and polite."

Tubbo snorts at that. Spider-Man's pretty funny. "Um, so what were you thinking? I could get started on upgrading your suit, maybe outfitting your web shooters with different modes-oh, that reminds me! Is your webbing made out of a nylon-silicone polymer? Or is it something else? Do you have a formula for it, or some samples I can look at to duplicate?" Tubbo asks, a flurry of questions, and Spider-Man just stares. Maybe he's blinking. Tubbo can't tell.

"Uh, I don't make my webs, not synthetically, anyway" Spider-Man answers, and Tubbo clasps his hands together. Oh, this is so cool. If Spider-Man produces his webs organically, there's potential for so many types of modifications, or even different gadgets that could utilise the webs for other purposes! "Also, I was sort of thinking about just getting my suit modified? It was you who reinforced the hoodie last time, right? It's held up really well. Props, man."

Well, that's both disappointing and absolutely amazing. On one hand, Spider-Man had actually *liked* Tubbo's idea for reinforcing his

suit, commended it, even, but on the other hand, Tubbo might just end up being Spider-Man's seamster rather than his tech guy. "Oh," he says, feeling awkward, shoulders up by his ears. It's a little embarrassing; he'd been so *eager*.

An awkward laugh comes from behind the mask, and Spider-Man rubs the back of his neck. "I mean, if you've got other ideas, you can tell me, I've done some sketches myself, I just don't know how we'd do much *actual* tech without access to expensive materials," he explains, and Tubbo smiles, relieved.

"Oh, trust me, I've got *plenty* of ideas, and the materials to make 'em," Tubbo says, and Spider-Man crosses his arms. It's so hard to tell whether it's out of amusement or incredulosity when he's got that mask on. Tubbo's reminded of his initial idea, and he perks up. "But if you're looking for suit modifications specifically, I've been drawing up a few concepts! My aunt owns a fabric shop, so I can make you a new one no problem! I'm also thinking that it could help with public relations if you had a more expressive mask, like one that makes the eyes move along with your own. That shouldn't be too hard, I've been researching mo-cap stuff-oh, and I could make the embroidery more of a boning, so that you-why are you laughing?"

Spider-Man snorts, shoulders shaking. "*Boning*," he manages, and Tubbo blinks. How old *is* this guy? Clearing his throat, Spider-Man puffs his chest out and nods. "But, yes, those sound like great ideas. Do you have any preliminary sketches?"

Tubbo brightens. Of course he does! He leads Spider-Man over to his desk and pulls out his spare notebook, opening up to his most recent design. "It's a little rough-I'm not exactly the best artist-but the specs are all there. The exoskeletal embroidery would look like the one you have now, it would just do more to support your super-strength," Tubbo explains. "By the way, you'll probably have to give me a more comprehensive idea of all your powers. I know most of them, but it would really help me out if you could let me know the limits so I can work around them, y'know?"

"Huh. You've really thought about this, haven't you?" Spider-Man asks, and Tubbo nods. Of course he has, this is the fucking *dream*. It's insane; he can't believe Tommy had managed to get him this

opportunity, let alone that Spider-Man's actually taking him seriously. "Is there any way I could get crime reports while in the suit? I can't exactly pull out my phone on patrol."

Tubbo nods, flipping to a page with a sketch of a potential comms system, able to fit within the mask and display alerts in the corner of Spider-Man's vision. Spider-Man lets out another *huh* of slight disbelief. "I've got a hell of a lot of free time," he says, and Spider-Man laughs. Tubbo flips through each page carefully, stopping on his favorite. "This is actually one of the only designs in here that I *don't* have the materials to make, but it's so fucking dope, dude."

"What *is* it?" Spider-Man asks, leaning down closer to the desk, presumably to get a better look at the sketch.

Grinning proudly, Tubbo scribbles down the name. "The self-piloting interactive drone, engaged remotely. S.P.I.D.E.R for short," he explains, and Spider-Man turns to stare at him. Maybe he's blinking. Again, Tubbo has no idea, which is mainly why he'd really like those movable eyelids; it'd make the guy seem less superhuman. More approachable. "It'd be a drone embedded somewhere in your suit-probably the chest area of your hoodie-that I can deploy and engage with right from my computer if you ever find yourself in a sticky situation."

"Absolutely not, I don't want you involved in this any more than you have to be," Spider-Man says firmly, and Tubbo's shoulders slump. Seemingly softening a bit, Spider-Man sighs, putting one hand on Tubbo's shoulder. "Listen, as talented as you are and as great as these ideas may be, I *do not* want to put you in potential danger. If it's attached at all to your I.P. address, you could be tracked down if the drone were captured and dissected."

Well, Tubbo supposes, that's a pretty fair position. "So, um... just the suit mods, then?" he asks, and Spider-Man hesitates. Tubbo goes into a bit of a ramble; he's really nervous. "If you want, I could show you some of my earlier sketches-I've been modifying the designs to keep up with some of the stuff you've been handling! Like those two guys that you were fighting-404 and the other one, can't remember his name for the life of me-they're proper bad guys, though, I figured it couldn't hurt to have a mask that properly filters

through the gas and smoke, but without any samples of the gas 404 uses, I won't be able to."

Spider-Man chuckles. "Y'know, it's not even gas, the fucker uses *spores*. Like a mushroom," he says, and Tubbo nearly chokes on his own laughter. "I know, right?! Why cause more trouble for yourself trying to cultivate the right combinations of plants?"

"Pretentious assholes that rob banks don't seem to have the best track record with common sense," Tubbo jokes, and Spider-Man laughs-he actually *laughs*! At a joke that *Tubbo* had made! This really is the best day of his life, Tubbo's becoming friends with an actual superhero! "Right, well, I should really get your measurements so I can start working on the new suit, but my aunt's downstairs, and that's where the measuring tape is, and she'll ask questions if I take it up to my room. D'you happen to know them off the top of your head?"

"Uh... I think so?" Spider-Man says, scratching the back of his neck as he details them to Tubbo, who scribbles them down in the margins of his notebook as fast as he can. "While I'm at it, I should probably explain all the, ah, stuff about my powers, shouldn't I?"

Nodding, Tubbo readies his notebook and pen. "I'm all ready to take notes, bossman," he says, and he pauses for a moment. "Wait, I guess technically you really *are* my boss."

Spider-Man waves his hands frantically in front of him. "No, no, I'm not here to boss you around or anything-you're the one doing *me* a favor here, man," he says, and Tubbo can't bother to hide the grin that spreads across his face at that. "Right, where to start, where to start..."

Tubbo spends the next half hour writing faster than he's ever written in his entire life.

By the time Spider-Man's left-something about how he's got to get home before someone gets worried, which is nice, because Tubbo's always wondered if someone's looking out for him-he has six pages of notes on Spider-Man's powers and about a billion different ideas based around them bouncing around in his head.

He starts to head downstairs to ask Puffy if he can use her sewing machine for a 'personal project' when he hears her shout in frustration. That's... unusual. "No! I told you, I'm not doing this again," she hisses into the phone, clearly trying to keep her conversation quiet. Tubbo feels like he shouldn't be eavesdropping. "... Absolutely not. No, that's-! How *dare* you. If you come within-no, I'm serious. I am!... I don't care. If you come within ten *miles* of my house, I swear to God, I'll-I will! No, *no*! You will *not*. I'm done-no, I am! I'm done having this conversation with you every few years! You're not! Good-fucking-bye. Stop calling me!"

Tubbo can hear her angry footsteps from here. Puffy throws her phone, probably into the couch again, if the *thump* of cushions is anything to go by. He heads down the stairs, purposefully making his steps heavy and slow so she knows he's coming and will have time to get herself together. Tubbo doesn't understand why, but Puffy always gets so upset with herself when Tubbo sees her being anything less than put together.

"Hey," he says, tentatively waving, and Puffy smiles weakly. "Can I, um, go to the shop tomorrow to work on a personal project? I need the sewing machine."

"Oh, of course, kiddo," she says, and he tries to pretend he doesn't notice the way her eyes are red-rimmed. Clearing her throat, Puffy ties her hair up and out of her face. "Did you need a ride to school tomorrow, or are you walking?"

"No, Tommy said Techno's giving us a ride," Tubbo says, glad to give Puffy one less thing to worry about at the very least, and she smiles, ruffling his hair. "Are you alright, Aunt P?"

Puffy just waves dismissively. "Don't worry about me, Tubbo. You just keep up the good work, okay?" she tells him, and Tubbo nods. This sucks. Sometimes Puffy's too worried over keeping him out of whatever problems she's having that she forgets to take care of herself. Puffy yawns, eyes droopy. "Get to bed at a reasonable hour, got it? I don't want you up until three in the morning again. It's important for teenagers to get enough sleep."

Rolling his eyes, Tubbo nods. "I will, I will. I've just got to take care

of some stuff for class before I do,” he says, and Puffy presses a kiss to the top of his head before heading upstairs. Technically that’s true, Tubbo’s just not mentioning the Spider-Man work he’s gonna do; if Ranboo were here, he’d be telling Tubbo that a lie by omission is still a lie, but Ranboo’s *not* here.

So Tubbo waits for Puffy’s light to go out under her door before sneaking down to the garage and getting to work.

Ah, yes, Tommy, what a great idea you've had. Letting your best friend be the guy in the chair for your alter ego in lieu of an attempt at making up for your previous behavior definitely cannot backfire in any way whatsoever.

and we're fighting in the grocery store

Chapter 14: and we're fighting in the grocery store

Tommy grapples with what it means to be Spider-Man without the mask.

The boy cannot catch a break, y'all.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

“You did *what?!?*”

“Now, hang on just a second, Tech, you’re not getting this,” Tommy says, hands in front of his chest in a placating manner, and Techno pinches the bridge of his nose between his index finger and thumb, his other hand on his hip. It’s a little funny. “See, Tubbo doesn’t know my identity, he’s just gonna be making my tech! He feels better because he gets to work with me as Spider-Man, he forgives me, I get free shit, it’s a win-win! Or, uh, win-win-win? Do I count myself twice since I’ve got an alter ego?”

Techno lets out a pained groan. “You’re... literally the worst. This is so stupid. You *have* to realize that. This is the worst idea you’ve ever had, and that’s sayin’ something,” Techno tells him, and Tommy waves him off. He just has to be a little extra careful around Tubbo, that’s all. “You *have* to be cautious. I know you trust Tubbo, alright, but with those weird guys runnin’ around-what did you say their names were again?”

"404 and Blaze," Tommy answers, tinkering with his web shooter and jumping back slightly as a spark flies towards his face. His reflexes kick in and he accidentally fires a web off; it sticks to Techno's ceiling and Tommy grins sheepishly. "Whoops. My bad, big man."

Scoffing, Techno swipes at the webbing with the knife he's taped to the end of a broom handle, and it comes away after a few hacks. "Such stupid names," Techno mutters, setting the broom back down. He picks up Tommy's English lit book and raises a brow. "I'm givin' you crap about this later, but Wilbur's got a quiz planned for Tuesday, so you gotta study. Next question is, uh... where did Valjean plan to move with Cosette?"

"It's England, innit?" Tommy asks, and Techno nods. Oh, thank fucking *God*, Tommy's surprised that he's retained any of this shit. He fidgets with the screw embedded in the top panel of the web shooter, sighing in relief as it *click-clacks* back into place. "Fucking finally! That was a piece of work, I hope that motherfucker doesn't kick my web shooters again. Blaze and his goddamn steel-toe boots, man, *Christ*."

"Uh huh. What does Enjolras do to the drunk revolutionary that shoots a homeowner?" Techno asks, barreling on through their study session, and Tommy thinks for a moment before drawing his thumb across his neck and sticking out his tongue. Techno snorts and tosses him the last burger of what had previously been a pile of fast-food meals. Tommy devours it. "Alright, that's all the questions for now. Wilbur and Kristin are goin' to the store, you should go with 'em."

Tommy squints. "You're just trying to pawn me off to them so you don't have to hang out with me," he accuses, and Techno nods. Tommy kicks at his ankle. "Fuck you, bitch, I'll have you know I'm an absolute *delight*."

Rolling his eyes, Techno shoves Tommy towards the door. "Get outta here, child, and make sure you get me a new potato peeler, Phil broke my good one," he says, and Tommy swats at his arms. Techno just huffs and leans in the doorframe, taking up as much space as he can so that Tommy can't make a mad dash back in,

and Tommy scowls. Techno pokes his forehead. "I know you don't wanna hang out with Wil because neither of you can get over yourselves, but you're gonna have to eventually. He misses you, and I know for a fact you miss him too."

"I'll have you know I do *not* miss Wilbur, and you are simply spewing lies and slander," Tommy says, eyes narrowed, and Techno just closes the door in his face. Bastard. Tommy slams his hand on the door. "Let me back in! Techno! I'll fuckin'-I'm gonna wear you down, Techno, I'll just keep talking until you let me in!"

He smacks the door again, hearing Techno sigh when he presses his ear against it, and Tommy grins. All he's gotta do is annoy Techno into giving in, and then he won't have to spend, like, an hour with Wilbur and Kristin while they argue over what brand of tea to get or some shit. He goes to start a screechy rendition of 'Ninety-Nine Bottles of Beer on the Wall' when Wilbur's door opens up down the hall. Shit.

Wilbur blinks in surprise behind those goofy owlsh glasses of his, clearly unsure of how to go about this. Tommy's got no fucking clue either, in Wilbur's defense. "Oh, uh... hey, Toms," he says, and Tommy nods, returning to his efforts of pounding on Techno's door with a *bit* more frantic energy than he'd already had. Wilbur coughs awkwardly and Tommy momentarily pauses his knocking. "Did you, ah, want to come with me and Mumza to the store? I could get you some of those energy drinks Phil doesn't let you have."

At that, Tommy actually considers it. "Is this-are you serious, or is this just a bribe?" he asks, only half-joking, and Wilbur laughs. Good. Tommy can work with this, he can be the comedic relief again. "Because if this is an empty promise, I'm gonna be so pissed off."

Snorting, Wilbur ruffles his hair. "Yeah, yeah, you're *very* intimidating," he says, and Tommy *is* very intimidating, thank you very much, Wilbur just so happens to not be a criminal facing him down. Wilbur jerks a thumb towards the stairs. "C'mon, I don't want to keep Kristin waiting."

"Fine," Tommy grumbles, and he follows Wilbur down into the

entryway, pulling his shoes on and nodding in greeting at Kristin. She twirls her keys in one hand and checks her phone with the other. Tommy straightens up, stretching his arms above his head. "Are we leaving or what?"

Kristin looks up from her phone, then puts her arm around Tommy and tugs him close, doing the same to Wilbur on her other side. "My boys! Well, two of my boys, anyway," she amends, and Tommy wiggles out of her grasp, holding the door open. Wilbur and Kristin leave first, and Tommy sprints out to the car, already clambering into the passenger seat as soon as Kristin unlocks the car. Wilbur squawks in protest, tugging on the car door handle as Tommy sticks his tongue out. Kristin sighs. "Tommy, Wil's taller than you, just let him have the seat."

Wilbur grins triumphantly, and Tommy's half-tempted to smack the smirk off his face as he takes Tommy's rightful place in the front seat. "I am going to kill you, I will stab you in your sleep, Wilbur, I-yes, Wil, I *did* in fact do my homework, I'm such an angel and I definitely belong in the front seat, so glad you agree," Tommy says as Kristin settles into the driver's seat. She rolls her eyes and gestures for him to put his seatbelt on. Damn. "So why exactly are we going to the store?"

"I needed to grab some groceries and Wil needs some more pencils to put in his communal stash," Kristin says, pulling out of the drive. "Plus, he has to pick up-"

"Don't say it! It's so fucking embarrassing, I can't believe Quackity's making us do this," Wilbur bemoans, head in his hands, and now Tommy *has* to know. He very much appreciates anything that embarrasses Wilbur. Kristin goes to elaborate, and Wilbur glares at her. "Kristin, *don't*."

She shakes her head. "It's not *embarrassing*, Wil, it's cute! All the teachers are required to volunteer anyway, it's just a uniform!" Kristin reassures him, and oh, Tommy knows he's gonna get a kick out of this. He's hoping to get lucky enough to get a picture, for blackmail material, of course. Kristin glances back, slightly wary of Tommy's grin, but she continues anyway. "Your headteacher's having the staff dress up like carnival barkers for the fundraiser,

that's all. Like, I said, *Wilbur*, it's cute!"

Pretending to slam his face on the dash, Wilbur groans. "I'm dead. I'm dying. I want to end it all," he mumbles, cheek pressed against the dash. Kristin nudges him upright. Wilbur immediately whirls around to glare at Tommy, who blinks innocently. "I don't want to hear a *word* about this, and you will be avoiding me for the entire time. Understood?"

"Oh, but Wilby, I just *have* to see my big brother at the carnival," Tommy says, and Wilbur's glare gets harsher. Tommy grins at him. "We're gonna take lots of pictures there to remember our lovely brotherly bonding, Wil, don't you worry."

Wilbur starts to lean into the backseat to shove at Tommy, but Kristin pushes at him until he's properly seated again. "If you make me crash this car, so help me God," she warns, and Wilbur shrinks sheepishly into his seat. They sit in a relatively peaceful truce until she pulls into the parking lot. "Alright, now *behave*. We don't need to be kicked out of another store because you two are having a 'soup can war' again."

"I will have you know that Tommy started it," Wilbur says, and Kristin affixes him with a flat stare. He sighs. "Yeah, okay, admittedly, I *was* the one who hit Techno with the can of chicken noodle, but *he's* the one who missed Tommy and hit that old guy by accident."

"I have done nothing wrong, ever, in my life," Tommy says, and Kristin rubs her temples. At that, Tommy pokes her shoulder, brows raised. "You *did* join in on the can war, Kristin."

"I know, but Phil's not here and Techno's busy, so *someone* has to be the sensible one," she says, and Wilbur snorts. The three of them get out of the car, and Tommy sticks by Kristin so that Wilbur's the one stuck pushing the cart. Kristin glances down at her phone, frowning thoughtfully as she scans what's presumably a list. "Right, so Phil wants some more coffee pods, we need milk, eggs, rice, produce, laundry detergent... also, tofu for this recipe Phil sent, which is probably going to be horrible, so everybody better tell him it's great. Wil, you needed pencils, and Techno needed..."

"Another potato peeler," Tommy finishes for her, and she smiles gratefully at him as she follows Wilbur down the first aisle they come across. Tommy stays back a bit, if just to look around; he can probably convince Kristin to get him something not on the list. He's surprised to see a display towards the back with red and white theming, and he scoots past Wilbur—who's currently picking out Halloween-themed pencils—to get a closer look.

Holy shit. It's got Spider-Man merch.

Well, the merch probably isn't *technically* merch, given that Tommy hasn't exactly given anyone the rights to his alter-ego's likeness, but it's still shirts, pencil cases, and folders with his mask on them. That's *insane*. He barely registers Kristin coming up to him and giving him a curious look, and Tommy quickly steps back from the display, cheeks pink.

Kristin grins at him. "Are you a Spider-Man fan now?" she asks, and Tommy rolls his eyes. If he weren't the superhero in question, maybe, but he's not *that* self-absorbed. Then, an idea pops into his head, and Tommy lights up.

"No, actually, but I know *Techno's* a big fan," he says, and Kristin blinks in surprise. Tommy nods. "Oh yeah, Techno talks my fuckin' ear off about the guy. It's super annoying, it's all 'Wow, Tommy, look how cool Spider-Man is, look how good he is at beating up criminals, listen to me talk about fighting techniques for the next three hours' and shit."

She chuckles, examining one of the shirts on display. "D'you think we should get him something?" she asks, and Wilbur comes to join them, a few groceries in the cart with the pencils he'd grabbed. Kristin picks up one of the shirts, one that says *I'm a Super-Fan of Spider-Man!* and Tommy stifles a laugh. "What about this one?"

"Yeah, that's *perfect*," Tommy says, nodding eagerly, and Wilbur raises a brow at him, clearly wondering what the hell is happening. "It's for Techno."

"Techno's a Spider-Man fanboy?" Wilbur asks skeptically, and Kristin shrugs, putting the shirt in the cart. Oh, this is fucking *great*.

Tommy grins and shoots Wilbur a thumbs-up. Humming, Wilbur starts to head towards the next aisle, and Tommy walks beside him. Wilbur picks up some gross-looking health bars and puts them in the cart. He glances at Tommy. "No wonder he got so uptight about it that one time."

Ah, shit. "Uh, yeah, probably, but we don't have to rehash it," Tommy says quickly. He'd rather not have to hear Wilbur being reasonably critical of his alter ego again. Wilbur makes a noise, sort of between a yes and a sigh, and Tommy's shoulders slump in relief. Tommy figures he should steer the subject further away, just in case. "So... how are things going with Ms. Saumon?"

Wilbur glares at him. "Well, a certain idiot child I happen to know didn't exactly *help* the situation," he grumbles, and Tommy grins sheepishly. Wilbur looks away, cheeks suspiciously red. "But she *did* have a laugh over it, and then she complimented my sensible cardigan, so I told her I liked her braids, and then we ate lunch together. So not a total loss."

Brightening up, Tommy nudges Wilbur's arm. "Aye, there you go, big man! You're very welcome, by the way," he says, smug, and Wilbur rolls his eyes. Tommy runs a bit ahead and grabs a pack of the energy drinks Wilbur had promised him, shoving them into the cart, right next to the stupid health bars. "I have more than earned these."

With a sigh, Wilbur keeps pushing the cart, and eventually, Kristin meets them towards the front, arms filled with the rest of the groceries. She sets them in the cart with a huff. "You could've waited for me," she says, and Wilbur gives her an apologetic grimace.

The three of them get in a long-ass line, because evidently, only three cashiers are in the store today, and the whole of London's practically getting their groceries all at once. Alright, maybe that's a tad dramatic, but still, this line is long. "You gonna ask Ms. Saumon out or what?" Tommy asks, and Wilbur smacks him upside the head. Jackass.

"Fuck off," he huffs, and Kristin shakes her head fondly before going back to skimming the magazine headlines on display. Wilbur glances over the heads of the people in front of them, and Tommy

straightens up as The Sense itches at the back of his mind. Wilbur's eyes go wide, and a shot rings out. Wilbur grabs both of them and shoves them all to the ground. "Stay down, stay down, there's a fucking maniac waving a gun around up by the doors."

Christ, Tommy's luck is shit.

"Oh my God," Kristin whispers, and Tommy freezes up. Well, fuck. He can't just sit here and do nothing, but it's not like he's got the suit on right now. The guy with the gun is currently demanding that the cashiers hand over everything in the register, and Kristin is shaking, and Wilbur's covering his own mouth with his hands, eyes watery, and Tommy stands up.

The robber whirls to point the gun at him, and Tommy puts his hands up, a shaky smile on his face. This is fine, all he's gotta do is the Spider-Man thing without actually *being* Spider-Man, that's all. "Hey! You, uh, look very good today, king," he says, and Wilbur grabs at his leg and *tugs*, but Tommy stays standing. If he can keep the guy occupied enough to let one of the cashiers or patrons get the cops here, everyone will be fine. "Why don't you put the gun down? I think you're scaring quite a few people, yeah?"

Slightly taken aback, the robber jerks the gun in Tommy's direction, and Tommy frowns. Well, that's just plain unsafe, doesn't this guy know anything about firearms? "The fuck's your problem, kid?! Shut up and I won't shoot," he says, and Wilbur's tugging gets more frantic. The Sense tugs too, and Kristin reaches up with a trembling hand to grab the bottom of Tommy's shirt and pull. The robber sees it, and he laughs. "You got people that want you alive, so get back on the ground."

"It would be a whole lot easier for me to live if you put the gun down? I mean, we all know you've got it by now, right, so-so it's not like the cashiers are gonna stop getting you the money, see?" Tommy says, all of his thoughts quickly turning into word vomit, and the robber blinks, gun wavering for a moment. "Yeah, see? You don't have to point it at anyone, it's intimidating all on its own-not that *you're* not intimidating, you've got that all-black thing going on and honestly, it's working for you, so. Holster the gun for now?"

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" the robber asks, and Tommy gives him a helpless shrug. The tugging hasn't stopped. The safety clicks off, and Tommy immediately pales. "Talks a big game and gets queasy at the first sign of danger. Fuckin' take a look at that."

Tommy laughs nervously. "Listen, man, I dunno if you've heard, but Spider-Man's on patrol today," he lies, and it's the robber's turn to go pale. Tommy takes a step forward, just out of Wilbur's grip. "Yeah, so now is probably *not* the best time to have a bunch of hostages. I hear he doesn't exactly go easy on the guys that put innocents in danger. Maybe you should let some of us go, man."

The robber's gun is pointed directly at him again. "Fuck do you know about Spider-Man's schedule, shithead?!" he demands.

"I have a Twitter account, *shithead*," Tommy answers back, like an idiot, and Wilbur whimpers somewhere behind him as Kristin tugs harder on Tommy's shirt. The robber looks unsure again, though, if not a bit pissed at being called a shithead. "Help's gonna get called either way, because you're only one guy, and fun fact-people are capable of texting when they're sitting on the floor. Make things easier for yourself and let some of us go."

Tommy glances briefly down at Kristin, whose eyes go wide, and she lets go of his shirt to pull out her phone. The robber starts to march over, so Tommy steps forward to meet him halfway, hands still in the air, so that Kristin doesn't get caught. "Listen, you little shit, I'll shoot every fucking person in this store if I have to," the robber growls, and Tommy lets out a shaky little laugh at that.

"What, and get a life sentence rather than just a couple years? I mean, c'mon, man, you could probably get out in two to five if you willingly let hostages go. You could argue in court you were only in it for the money," Tommy says, and he looks down at the people still on the floor, and one toddler-vaguely familiar-stares up at him from his mother's lap before putting a finger up to his own lips. Tommy's eyes go wide. He turns back to the robber. "There's a kid in here, man. Like an actual, *little* kid."

Hesitating, the robber looks down at the kid, then back up. The gun wavers. "Two to five?" he asks, and Tommy nods.

"Yeah. You'd be out in no time if you let us go," Tommy says. He's dealt with this type of criminal before-talks a big talk, but has someone that matters to them. This guy's probably got a kid, if his reaction to the kid on the ground is anything to go by. Tommy swallows around the lump in his throat and steps closer. "You don't wanna do this."

"I got no choice, kid," the robber says, and The Sense kicks into overdrive, and Tommy ducks to the right as the robber shoots. The bullet whizzes past his ear. *Fuck*. There are sirens outside, at least, which means Tommy bought the cashiers and the patrons enough time. People start making a mad dash for the exit as a cop bursts through the door, and Tommy has no time to react before the robber grabs him and holds the gun to his temple. "You're not goin' anywhere. I let myself get distracted, and now?! Now *this* is your fault."

Well, he's not entirely wrong. The shop's emptied out by now, and the cops have their guns up, but they can't do anything until Tommy's out of the way. He winces at the cold metal at his temple, but again-it's nothing new. "I mean, to be fair, you let me talk for a *while*, I honestly can't believe that wor-okay, okay! I'll shut up," he says as the gun digs into the side of his head; it's painful.

"You're gonna let me walk or I shoot this kid!" the guy shouts at the cops, and Tommy's hands start to get shaky. No superpower's gonna let him survive a bullet to the brain. "And no calling that spider-fuck either!"

Irony. Gotta love it.

One of the cops starts to step forward, and the robber fucking *yanks* Tommy closer by his neck, and Tommy nearly gags at the heavy breathing by his ear. It sounds so gross, especially with his enhanced hearing. Plus, this guy must've had a bag of fucking onions for lunch or some shit. "I can't let you walk, but you'll get less time if you let him go," the cop says, and Tommy snorts.

"I already told him that, he's not a very good listener," he says, and the robber's chokehold gets tighter. Tommy makes a face.

And then, suddenly, the robber's hold drops, and the gun clatters to the floor. Tommy whirls around, and Kristin's standing there, a broom with the tag still attached in her hands, her chest heaving as she holds it like a baseball bat. Wilbur kicks the gun away, and the guy groans, clutching at his head. The cops rush forward.

Tommy gets crushed into a hug immediately, and he shakily wraps his arms around Kristin's shoulders. "What on earth were you *thinking?!'*" she demands, pulling back to cradle his face in her hands, and she looks positively infuriated. Tommy just gives her a shaky grin, and her anger melts away into relief. "Thank fuck you're okay, I can't *believe* you did that, you're gonna give me a goddamned heart attack, I'm so glad you're safe."

"Lots of conflicting emotions," Tommy says, and Kristin sighs, eyes falling to his neck, probably to look for bruising. The good news is that, if there *is* any-and there doesn't seem to be much, judging by her expression-it'll be gone in a few days. Tommy looks to Wilbur, who's currently giving a statement to one of the officers. His hands are shaking, and his eyes are watery. "Is he alright?"

"He'll be fine," another officer says before Kristin can answer, and Tommy makes a face. Fucking Christ, that's the *I am better than you because I have a badge, and you must listen to my wisdom even though you solved the problem* face that cops always have when he's handed criminals over to them as Spider-Man. He's about to get a lecture. "Don't put yourself in danger like that, kid, it's-"

"Excuse me, but he's the one who bought you enough time to get here. It was a *very* stupid and dangerous way of doing it," Kristin elaborates as Tommy starts to brighten up, "but *you* don't get to tell him that, *I* do, unless he's participating in illegal activity. You aren't his parent, just do your job, get our statements, and let us go home."

Tommy slips towards Wilbur, who's still shaking, and gently nudges him. The officer he'd been talking to is already walking out, and Wilbur tugs Tommy into a hug almost as tight as the one Kristin had given him, and Tommy lets out a quiet *oof*. "You fucking moron, I was so scared," he mumbles, hands fisted up in Tommy's shirt, and Tommy chuckles. Wilbur huffs. "I'm serious! If you ever see a gun, the first thing you do is *not* try to talk the person holding it out of

using it, are you insane?!"

Worming his way out of the hug, Tommy scowls. "I'm gonna get an earful from Kristin already, I don't need to hear it twice," he says, and he's surprised at how shaky his voice is. Huh. *That's* never happened in the suit. Tommy doesn't know why his hands won't let go of Wilbur's jacket, either; he hasn't had a problem with unsticking in ages. "Wilbur. Wil. I-I think I need to go sit down now. Please."

At that, Wilbur blinks, and Tommy thinks about Henry, who's waiting in his bedroom, where there are no guns and no robbers and no dangers. His hands unstick, and Wilbur leads him to one of the benches at the front of the store. "You alri-that's a stupid question," Wilbur mutters, rubbing small circles over Tommy's upper back as Tommy struggles to breathe enough. "Of course you're not fine. You did something brave-stupid, but brave-and it must've been terrifying. You're okay now, Toms."

"I *know* I'm okay now," Tommy says through gritted teeth, and the sirens still going off are starting to sound like *too much* in that all-too-familiar enhanced way. Wilbur just keeps rubbing his back, and the store staff start to filter back in, along with some of the patrons who'd left their carts inside. Tommy takes a deep breath. He's been face-to-face with the barrel of a gun before, this should be nothing.

"You're gonna be fine," Wilbur says, and Tommy believes him. "So long as you don't pull another stunt like that, that is. I'll throttle you myself if you so much as sniff a gun ever again, got it?"

Tommy lets out a quiet laugh, and he leans onto Wilbur's shoulder, the tremors finally leaving his body. "I think I've got a bit of a hero complex," he says, only half-joking, and Wilbur snorts.

"No shit, you idiot," Wilbur says, "now let's go get our shit, I wanna see Techno in that stupid shirt."

Getting home is a pain in the ass, mostly because Kristin lectures him the whole way there.

He excuses himself to his room pretty quickly; Tommy just wants to lie down and have an actual break for once before he has to go to Tubbo's as his alter ego to pick up his new suit. It's not even half an hour before Techno comes barging in, stupid shirt and all, and Tommy groans, one arm over his eyes.

"Fuck off, I'm taking a nap," Tommy says, and Techno shoves his legs over so he can sit on the bed. Tommy does a double take and sits up abruptly. Techno raises a brow, and Tommy pokes a finger into his chest. "You're wearing the shirt."

"So I am," Techno says, completely unembarrassed, and Tommy frowns. His plan had backfired, and rather badly at that. Techno seems to genuinely like the shirt. As though he can sense what Tommy's thinking, Techno smiles easily. "I don't like the shirt, I just refuse to let you win. Now explain to me exactly what you were thinkin' when you started trying to talk a criminal out of holdin' up a store, because I genuinely can't wrap my mind around it."

Tommy tosses a pillow at him. "I was just trying to do the right thing, man. I can't just stop being Spider-Man when I take off the mask," he says, because that should be obvious to Techno by now, but apparently it isn't, given the way Techno's brows furrow.

"Tommy, that's... literally the point of a secret identity. You get to stop bein' a hero once that mask comes off," Techno says, and Tommy sighs. "I know what you meant, alright? You just gotta stop puttin' so much pressure on yourself to be perfect all the time. You're gonna make mistakes, and you *get* to be scared when somethin' scary happens to you."

"But I shouldn't be. I'm Spider-Man, if anyone's going to be scared, it *can't* be me, not when there's a store full of civilians being held at gunpoint," Tommy tells him. Techno has to understand-Tommy takes the initiative because he *has* to. There's no time to be scared when he's in the heat of battle, sure, but there's no room for fear when there's people to be protected, either. "Listen, Tech, I know you mean well, but I'm fine."

Techno falls silent for a minute, and Tommy knows better than to think it's because he agrees with Tommy. He's probably just

formulating his next argument. Techno looks at Tommy and grabs his chin, tilting Tommy's head to the side. Right. The bruising. Sighing, Techno lets go, and Tommy makes a face at him.

"Wilbur said you were shaken up after it happened," Techno says, and Tommy blinks. He knows he has to curb that fear, but he hadn't actually expected Techno to point that out. To his surprise, though, Techno says the opposite. "Understandable. You had a gun in your face and couldn't do anything to defend yourself. What I *don't* get is why you're clearly beatin' yourself up about it."

At that, Tommy scoffs. He's not beating himself up over anything, thank you very much. He's just... thinking about how to prevent a similar situation in the future. "I'm not, I-I... I had a moment, I'm fine now, it won't happen again," he says quickly.

Techno gently places his hand over Tommy's. "You know it's... it's okay if it *does*, right?" he asks, and Tommy hesitates. "You're a normal kid under that mask, Tommy. You can't use your powers when it's off, and when you're unmasked and in danger like you were today, you're not untouchable anymore. Fear is *normal*, Tommy. Even in the suit, it's normal. You *should* feel scared when you're facing down criminals every day, because it's *scary*."

"I shouldn't! I can't be scared, not when there are civilians that *don't* have powers to defend themselves like I do, not when they're so much more fuckin' scared than I am!" Tommy protests, and Techno searches for *something*, eyes scanning over Tommy's face.

"Tommy... what you're doin' is being *brave*. You can be scared. You can feel fear. What you do, the fact that you stand up and do what's right in spite of that fear," Techno says, "*that's* what makes you brave."

Tommy's protests die on his tongue. "I guess."

"Now what you did today? That was brave *and* stupid."

"Shut the fuck up, Techno."

Techno: Don't play the hero when you don't have a mask on, you're in danger just like everybody else and it's okay to be scared.

Tommy: That sign can't stop me because I can't read!

comms and collapses

Chapter 15: comms and collapses

A new suit, an arms deal, and some unforeseen disasters.

Clingyduo *and* bedrock bros all in one chapter? It's more likely than you think.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t my favorite tech nerd, fancy meeting you here,” Tommy says, currently upside-down in Tubbo’s window, and Tubbo shrieks, throwing his headphones off and looking around the room wildly. Tommy snorts, and he clambers in, tapping Tubbo on the shoulder. “Sorry if I startled you.”

Tubbo clears his throat and smooths down his hair, and Tommy stifles a laugh, glad that the mask makes it hard to tell he’s trying not to cackle. “Hey! What’s up, Spider-Man, how’ve you been?” Tubbo asks, feigning nonchalance, and Tommy glances over at Tubbo’s desk. His Twitter is open. Tubbo grins nervously. “So, here for your suit, yeah?”

Nodding, Tommy crosses his arms and leans back. “I mean, considering I’ve got to patrol tomorrow, it’d be great to have a suit that’s not torn in, like, three different places,” he says, and Tubbo chuckles quietly, heading over to the closet.

“I had to hide all of this from my aunt, which was-ack-not easy to

do,” Tubbo says, slightly strained as he drags a bag out, and Tommy’s brows furrow. What the hell is in that thing that’s making it so hard to carry? “This also has supplies for other shit, your suit isn’t fifty kilos or anything, don’t worry!”

Tommy just blinks, though he must look frustratingly blank to Tubbo, whose lips press into a thin, nervous line. “That’s-funny thing is that it wouldn’t even be much of a problem if it *were* fifty kilos, super strength and all that,” Tommy jokes, and Tubbo huffs out a laugh as he crouches down to sift through the bag. There are a few mechanic clanks, and something that sounds like glass shattering, but then Tubbo is lifting up a newspaper-wrapped parcel. “Here you are! The Spider-Suit two-point-oh!”

Surprisingly, it *is* a little hefty, and Tommy starts to unwrap it, but Tubbo stops him, a hand on his wrist. “This isn’t a bomb or anything, right?” Tommy asks, and Tubbo lets out a bewildered little laugh. “Like, I’m not gonna open this and have it explode in my face? That’s not why you’re making me wait, is it?”

He’s only half-joking. “You should wait to open it because it makes for easier travel like this, that’s all!” Tubbo says, looking suspiciously nervous, and Tommy narrows his eyes. “I just-! It’s sort of a-the way it works is that it’ll recognize whatever surroundings you activate it in as a safe place to *deactivate*, and I wanted that feature to be, like, a fun little surprise, but I guess I should’ve told you out the gate because you don’t exactly want me knowing your identity whenever you come in here, right? So I-!”

“Tubbo, it’s fine, I think that’s a cool feature,” Tommy reassures him, and Tubbo visibly relaxes, an easy smile on his face. “So... no other features aside from the ones we discussed, right? I don’t want any more surprises out on the field or anything, so there better not be some hidden speaker that blasts *We Are The Champions* or some shit every time I take down a criminal.”

Tubbo snorts, and Tommy grins. God, talking with Tubbo like this is so much fun. Things are still a little tense without the mask between them, given that Tommy had kind of offered an opportunity in lieu of a proper attempt at rectifying the problem-then again, he can’t really do that. So talking with Tubbo as his alter ego is a much needed

source of levity.

"Nope, no surprises here," Tubbo says, so easily that Tommy believes him and leaves it at that.

Truth be told, Tommy's really happy with the new suit.

It's got all the features Tubbo had said he'd add-the eyes move in accordance with Tommy's own, the spiderweb embroidery's now an exoskeleton of sorts, and the hoodie and shorts are so reinforced that they're practically armored. Well, they're still soft; Tommy doesn't exactly know what kind of magic Tubbo had worked to make that happen, but he's certainly not about to complain.

The gloves of the bodysuit have even been outfitted with a new kind of fabric on the tips of the fingers that let Tommy not only use his phone while in the suit, but his gripping and sticking is so much more effective now. Plus, the suit fits *much* better than the previous one; Tommy's great at many things, but accurately sewing according to his own proportions is not one of them.

Tubbo had even included the little crime alerts that pop up in the corner of his vision, and Tommy's stopped more crimes in progress today than he has in the past week because of it. He's taking a lunch break-the guy running the food truck he'd gotten his lunch from actually gave it to him for free, which had been really nice-when he hears the telltale little chime of another crime alert, but it doesn't pop up in the corner of his vision like he'd begun to start expecting.

"There's an arms deal happening a few blocks over, sending the address to you as soon as I can," a voice says in his ear, and Tommy jumps up, what little is left of his lunch now discarded on the rooftop, and he whirls around, frantically looking for the source of the voice.

When there's no one there, Tommy hesitantly looks up at the sky. "God...?" he asks, a bit bewildered, and there's laughter coming through now. Tommy's eyes narrow. "Oh, you've got to be fucking

kidding me. *Tubbo?!"*

There's a panicked squeak, then silence. Tommy groans.

"Maybe...?" the voice-Tubbo's voice, specifically-says, and Tommy resists the urge to throw himself off of the roof. *"I know you said no additional features, but this one is good! See, I can talk to you, let you know about stuff that's going on, help you out, be your guy in the chair-"*

"This is exactly what I was trying to avoid," Tommy says, irritated, and Tubbo falls quiet once more. Which makes Tommy feel kind of bad, all things considered. "Not... it's not that you're not smart or capable or helpful, because you *are*, but I don't want to endanger you, Tubbo, seriously."

Tubbo's still quiet, and Tommy starts to pace on the roof. He doesn't want to upset Tubbo, really, he doesn't, but he also doesn't want Tubbo tied up in superhero business. Not when it could mean putting him in any line of danger, whether direct or indirect. There's another little chime, and an address appears in the corner of Tommy's vision.

"The arms deal's supposed to go down there in about five minutes," Tubbo says softly, and Tommy pulls his mask down fully, glancing longingly at the rest of his discarded lunch. He wonders if he should apologize to Tubbo; after all, he didn't say *not* to secretly make a comms system and install it in the new suit. Then again, that's really not the type of thing Tommy should have to specify. *"I can turn off the comms if you'd like, y'know."*

Tommy sighs. Tubbo just wants to help him, he shouldn't be so uptight. He'll just have to make sure he doesn't reveal to anyone that he's got someone talking to him. That should keep Tubbo sufficiently safe. "No, no, it's fine, just... give me something to call you other than your name, just in case," he says, and he can practically hear Tubbo light up.

"Oh, let me think! I could go by Big T, that's what my friend Tommy calls me, you've met him, yeah? Ah, no, that might mean someone could recognize it, everybody knows he calls me that... maybe something to do with computers? Shit, I don't know..." Tubbo trails

off, and Tommy starts to swing towards the address. *"I've got it! My codename could be Hive! Like hivemind, y'know? It makes sense, 'cuz you can always hear me. Plus, it goes with the whole bug theme you've got going on."*

Snorting, Tommy lands atop a rooftop above the alleyway where two men are waiting by a van, and he narrows his eyes. "Alright then, *Hive*, fill me in. What've you got on these guys?" he asks, watching one of the guys start to pace. He's got a massive gun, and it's pretty similar to 404's, but he's not got on any of the shit 404 usually wears.

He hears Tubbo's keyboard start to clack frantically. *"Right, so I found out there was an arms deal happening through a black market forum for people in the greater London area looking to find illegal weapons-don't ask how I managed it, I did it in a safe way, blah blah blah-and apparently these guys have tech taken from a research and development company,"* Tubbo says, and Tommy watches the guy not pacing reach into his pocket for his phone, presumably checking the time. *"Super classified shit, definitely not supposed to be used for weapons."*

Tommy keeps an eye on the front of the alleyway, only to be surprised at who he sees starting to enter. He swings over and drops down in front of the building, out of sight of the guys at the back of the alley. "Hey, aren't you the headteacher of that one school?" he asks, pitching his voice down slightly so that Quackity doesn't recognize him. Clearly taken aback, Quackity nods, and Tommy hums. "Might not wanna go that way, some shit's about to go down, and it's not gonna be safe."

A myriad of emotions crosses Quackity's face, mostly panic, then fear, then something Tommy can't name, and finally relief. "Thanks for letting me know, man," he says, and he starts tapping away at his phone, presumably to call the cops. Tommy grins, and Quackity blinks in surprise. "You get a new suit or something? I like the eye thing. Cool shit."

Tommy nods, and Quackity gives him a strained smile before leaving in the other direction, still tapping furiously away at his phone. Tubbo clears his throat, and Tommy jumps a bit in surprise

before heading back up to the rooftop. *"How'd you know he was the headteacher?"* Tubbo asks, and Tommy scrambles to answer in a non-incriminating way.

"I keep track of community leaders. It's important to me to make sure there's nobody corrupt in positions of local power," he says, and he's basically parroting a philosophy of Techno's, but it seems to work, because Tubbo hums and lets it go. Tommy drops down slightly to stick to a high area of the wall of the alley, still out of sight of the criminals. "Anything else you can tell me about their tech? It'd be great to know what I'm up against."

"Apparently, they're advertising it as an 'electricity based weapons system,' so my guess is a bunch of glorified tasers," Tubbo says, and Tommy stifles a laugh. *"I'd be careful if I were you, though. I'm looking at the post history-incredibly hard to do, these guys don't leave breadcrumbs so much as fucking bread particles, so you're welcome-and they've apparently been advertising this as '3 megawatts of pure power.'"*

Tommy hums. The guys are clearly starting to get impatient. The one that's pacing keeps glancing back at the other one, who's intensely absorbed with his phone, until he looks directly up at Tommy and readies his gun. Tommy leaps out of the way as the guy shoots, and he hears Tubbo gasp through the comms. Ah, right, Tubbo's not used to being immediately met with violence as soon as someone sees you.

The other guy shoots off a blast of-yeah, those are definitely spores. That's a poorly-disguised 404 for sure. "Well, hey there! Long time no see, fellas," Tommy says above the gunfire he's actively dodging, and 404 huffs in annoyance. "Don't be shy, show me those shiny new electric weapons you brought with you!"

The two startle at that, and 404 shoots another blast of spores towards him. *"D'you think you could grab me a sample of those? There should be a test tube in your hoodie pocket! I packed it in case this happened,"* Tubbo says, sounding way too excited at the prospect of studying whatever the hell kind of fungus 404 keeps spraying everywhere.

But, sure enough, Tommy's fingers close around a test tube, and he holds his breath as he swings through a cloud and collects some of the spore cloud in the tube. He deposits it back in his pocket and perches on the edge of a window, snickering as Blaze's gun clicks; he's out of ammo. "Are you gonna bring out the big guns or what? Heh, big *guns*, get it? Because yours isn't working," Tommy taunts, shoulders shaking with silent chuckles.

Blaze discards his empty gun and reaches into the van to presumably grab the weapon in question-and Tommy rolls his eyes, because Blaze is always so easy to rile up-but 404 puts a hand on his arm to stop him. "We're under strict orders not to touch it," he says, and Tommy gets a little tired of the chit-chat, firing off a web towards the two of them, who jump out of the way as soon as they hear the *thwip* of the web shooter. "Fuck off, arachnid!"

"My *name* is Spider-Man! D'you need me to sound it out for you? Makes sense, the two of you have the collective IQ of an eight-year-old, and that's being generous," Tommy huffs, swinging down to aim a kick at Blaze, who stumbles back as Tommy's foot connects with his stomach, and 404 smacks Tommy with the ass end of the spore gun. "Seriously, dude, get that fuckin' fart cloud gun out of here, it's so stupid."

He webs the spore gun to the van and ducks out of the way of Blaze's next punch, tumbling back as 404 kicks the back of his legs. Blaze takes the moment to dash for the van, and 404's too busy trying-and failing-to hit Tommy to notice. "Screw this, I'm ending it," Blaze says, and Tommy's eyes go wide as he looks down the barrel of a crazy-looking gun, the end of it glowing a bright purple and almost *crackling* with electricity. Tommy dives out of the way as the charging ends, and an enormous shock of violet light shoots out of the end of it, burning a hole into the brick directly behind where Tommy had been standing.

"You're not supposed to-! Dammit, Blaze, he's gonna be *pissed!*" 404 shouts, and Blaze ignores him, charging up the gun again, and Tommy goes pale, swinging and dodging through the alleyway as fast as super-humanly possible. "Put it down! We haven't tested it enough, that's why we needed to-"

There's a *bang* behind him, and Tommy turns around to see the two villains sputtering and coughing. He grins, swinging back towards them and crouching on the ground next to them, head tilted curiously. "Didn't your mums ever teach you boys not to stick a fork in the wall socket?" he asks, ruffling what little of Blaze's hair sticks out of his hood and mask. "Well, you've been punished enough. No need to humiliate you further, but I *will* be taking this."

He picks up the remains of the gun, finding the switch that Blaze had pushed earlier and turning it to the off side. 404 grabs his leg and digs his nails in. "Give-I'll kill you-give it," he says, and Tommy smacks his hand away. 404 pulls a pistol from his hip and points it up, clearly ready to shoot. "Leave... leave it here..."

And now Tommy's got *two* pistols aimed at him, and he stumbles back as Blaze reloads his gun. "Fuckin' pain in my ass," Blaze growls, and he fires. Tommy barely dodges in time. He should leave, but he can't just let them stay free; Wilbur had been right, he can't let that happen again. He goes to aim his web shooters at them, but Blaze keeps the pistol aimed steadily at him as he leans into his phone.

"Detonate," he says, and Tommy's eyes go wide as a distant *boom* sounds out. Blaze shoots again, and Tommy barely dips out of the way.

He takes off, dropping the gun and swinging through the city as fast as he can. Shit, he can't believe Blaze had planted a fucking *bomb* as a backup plan for some arms deal. Well, scratch that, he *can* believe it, but holy *fuck* is it annoying. "*Spider-Man?! Is everything alright? Did he just say detonate?!*" Tubbo asks, frantic, and Tommy can hear him typing away as he swings through the city. He doesn't answer, instead trying to find where the bomb had gone off. "*It's on main, it doesn't look too bad, but the building's not exactly brand new.*"

"Is it at risk of collapse?" Tommy demands, veering to the left and swinging towards where Tubbo had pointed him towards, and Tubbo's uneasy groan tells him all he needs to know; he has to get there before the ancient-ass foundation gives in. "Is there anyone in the building?"

"Yes, but they're evacuating as we speak. It's an office supply company's corporate building, they've got protocols set in place for fires, but not bombs... let's see... fourth and sixth floors are both used for storage, seventh is currently vacant, but the rest of them are for cubicles or individual offices," Tubbo tells him, and honestly, having him over comms is really useful. Now Tommy doesn't have to waste precious time looking through empty floors.

He swings and sticks himself to the side of the building. "Do a headcount for me, Hive?" he asks, and Tubbo hums as Tommy glances out over the crowd below.

"Almost everyone's out, eighth and ninth floors are still evacuating," Tubbo tells him, and Tommy nods, starting to head up to the windows, but the entire building *trembles*. Blaze must have planned a second wave. Shit. *"Fuck, fuck, fuck, the foundation's really at risk now, I don't know if you can get everyone out in time, man!"*

Tommy wracks his brain for a plan, looking down at his wrists. He could always try to hold the building together himself. "Where are the weakest points?!" he asks, slightly frantic as the brick continues to tremble, and Tubbo starts shouting them out. Tommy sticks a web to each one, swinging circles around the building and gathering each string of web in his hand until he's got about fifteen in his grasp.

He's glancing around for his best vantage point when the building starts to *slip*, like it's a watermelon that's been sliced in half or some shit, and Tommy panics, swinging up to a rooftop opposite the way the building's falling and pulling as hard as he can on the webs. His shoulders quake with the effort, and the building slows.

"Are you holding the fucking building together?!" Tubbo shrieks, and Tommy just grunts as his feet start to slip. He grips the webs harder and *tugs*, and the building starts to shift back into place. *"Uh, fuck, I'm-let me tell the cops to get everyone off the street, holy shit, man!"*

Tommy just laughs grimly and keeps his grip steady as best as he can. People are starting to file away from the front of the building, and his upper arms start to shake. As it turns out, buildings are heavy as *shit*. "How're we doing on getting them out?!" Tommy asks,

panicking slightly as his grip slackens just *slightly* and the building shifts again.

As he pulls it back again, Tubbo's frantic typing starts up once more. *"Almost everyone! Don't let go just yet, they-there's still a risk of the building collapsing on them if they're not out of range,"* he says, sounding apologetic, and Tommy grimaces, eyes narrowed in focus as the adrenaline starts to pump harder through his veins. *"Alright, everyone's out, but they still have to take everyone out of the potential collapse area, just a few more minutes!"*

Tommy honestly doesn't know if he *can* wait a few more minutes, but he'll be damned if he lets anyone else die because of him. Switching to grip the building with one hand for just a few seconds, Tommy webs his feet to the roof. He pulls as hard as he can on his webs, eyes going wide when they start to splinter at the edges.

"I don't think I've got a few minutes," he says, sounding haunted even to his own ears, and Tubbo just keeps typing. The people on the ground start running, and the few that are able to pile into cop cars that take off as fast as possible. Tommy's chest heaves, and the webs continue to splinter, the muscles in his arms finally starting to twitch and give out. His voice cracks. "Please tell me everyone's out of the way. *Please.*"

Tubbo makes a panicked sort of noise in the back of his throat. *"Just one more, they got left behind, they're almost out of the danger zone,"* he says, and one web splits off completely, the building tilting violently for a moment. Tommy curses under his breath. Two more webs snap, and Tommy chokes back a sob, still pulling as hard as he can despite the stabbing pain in his arms. The building is leaning over the street. *"They're gone, you're good!"*

The webs slip from his fingers, and Tommy falls back onto the roof as it crashes, his whole body shaking. The silence settles in once the bricks stop clanking against each other, and Tommy rips his feet out from under the webbing. "Fuck," he chokes out, "I almost let them die."

His shoulders start to shake, and his eyes sting. He can't tell whether it's from the steady drift of the dust cloud or from the

debilitating fear that's washed over him. Tommy's breathing is shaky, and he looks down at his hands, only a little surprised to see the fabric on the palms of his gloves torn away. His hands are blistered and calloused, pretty badly, and Tommy's not looking forward to the adrenaline wearing off.

"... Are you alright?" Tubbo asks, voice soft, and Tommy huffs out a laugh, and it comes out all wet with tears. God dammit, he can't be crying in front of *Tubbo*, not when he's in the mask, anyway. Not as though he's particularly happy when he cries in front of anyone as himself, but it's preferable to *this*. Tubbo doesn't seem to mind all that much, though. *"Okay, I guess not... I could show you where the nearest ice cream place is! Unless you're lactose intolerant. Oh, or I could put a funny video where the crime alerts usually go, if that'd make you feel better?"*

Tommy laughs again, less emotionally charged this time, thankfully. "No, I'm good, I'm fine," he says, and Tubbo hums skeptically. Tommy rolls his eyes, arms crossed. "Go do your homework or something, I'm gonna see if they need help with the cleanup."

"Fine. But you should go home eventually. You deserve some rest, Spider-Man," Tubbo says easily. *"I mean, I imagine it's pretty tiring, holding up an entire fucking building."*

Another laugh. Tommy thinks Tubbo's pretty good at this 'guy in the chair' thing.

"You're such a moron," is the first thing Techno says before wrapping Tommy's hands in neosporin and bandages. He can't exactly argue; he *had* just tried to single-handedly keep a building standing, after all. Techno gives his hand a satisfactory pat once he's done with his handiwork and looks back up to Tommy's face. "Who bombed the place?"

"Blaze," Tommy grumbles. He can't stand that guy, honestly. "I had him and 404 on the fuckin' ropes, man! I was so close! And then he leans into his fucking phone and goes 'detonate' like some goddamn movie villain, and I have to scramble to get across the city and make

sure a building full of people doesn't collapse!"

Techno blinks. Tommy's fuming now, running a hand through his hair and starting to pace along the length of his room. He'll probably have to bring the suit to Tubbo at some point to repair the gloves and drop off the spore sample, but that can wait. "I convinced Kristin to teach the two of us how to grill," Techno says in lieu of an actual response, and Tommy's brows furrow. The fuck does that have to do with anything? Techno just shrugs. "Figured it can't hurt, given you've been costing me a fortune in fast food, and it'd probably be cheaper to buy a bag of frozen patties at the store and cook 'em ourselves."

The corners of Tommy's mouth quirk up as he stifles a laugh. "Am I eating you out of house and home, Tech? Is this what you're telling me?" he asks, and Techno rolls his eyes. "What, is your pizza delivery graveyard shift not enough to provide for your dearest little brother? Why, Techno, I'm *hurt*, truly."

"Shut up and do your homework," Techno says, "we'll grill with Kristin on Friday, so take that afternoon off of patrol."

"No promises," Tommy says, settling down in his desk chair and opening up his in-progress essay on his laptop. He scowls. "Why don't I just pay you to do this *for* me?"

"Because that would be plagiarism, and Wil would recognize my writin' style from a mile away," Techno answers easily, "now, what did you decide to write about?"

Tommy groans, burying his head in his arms and blowing a strand of hair out of his face. "I dunno, we have to talk about some fuckin' literature theming bullshit. Wilbur wants us to compare the short story we just read with a piece of 'modern media,' whatever the fuck that means," he explains, and Techno hums. "At least we're done with the French book."

"*Les Mis*," Techno corrects automatically, and he slides the rubric printout closer to get a better look at it. He frowns thoughtfully. "I haven't read this story in years. Wilbur's makin' you guys read this?"

"He said it was, and I quote, 'really Halloween-y,' and then had to try and not laugh because it sounded like he'd said 'weenie,'" Tommy says flatly, and Techno runs a hand through his hair. It's loose, which is unusual; Techno usually keeps it in a braid. "Why've you got your hair down?"

Techno goes a bit red in the face, and Tommy tries not to laugh. He won't get an actual answer if Techno's too embarrassed, after all. "Phil wasn't home this mornin' and neither was Kristin, and I hate it when it's not balanced in the middle of my back, because then it just gets in the way," he mutters, and Tommy scoffs. "Let's get back to your essay-"

He stops talking when Tommy starts gathering his hair up. "I can do it for you, and you can tell me how I should write my essay," he offers, and Techno raises a brow at him. "Okay, you can explain how to do it, and *then* you can tell me what to do for my essay."

Techno huffs out a laugh, but he turns around nonetheless. "Just part it into three even pieces first," he says, and Tommy gets to work doing that, tongue peeking out of the corner of his mouth in concentration. Techno slides the rubric off the desk and examines it further. "Why don't you use a horror game or somethin' as your example? There's gotta be some themin' or whatever in one of those that'll give you enough to get a good grade."

"I guess so. I was thinking of doing that, but I wasn't sure which one to use," Tommy says, and Techno hums as Tommy finishes smoothing out the three sections of hair. "Alright, what do I do next, big man?"

"Start moving them over one another-alternate, there you go, you're gettin' the hang of it," he says, and Tommy tries his best to imitate the way he's seen Phil and Kristin do it a thousand times. "You could always just point out similar means of causing suspense. Don't yank so hard, you're gonna rip my hair out."

"Sorry," Tommy mumbles, carefully moving the leftmost strand to the inside. "Right, so I just explain how the scary shit makes you feel scared?"

Techno huffs. “No, you have to talk about thematic *elements*,” he emphasizes, and Tommy makes a face. That sounds like pretentious bullshit, and it probably is. “Like, what words in the story make the atmosphere tense? What parts of the game have you on the edge of your seat? Stuff like that. You almost done?”

“Yeah, I’m just finishing up the last bit. I think I get what to do for my essay now,” Tommy says, and Techno passes him a hair tie. He ties the end of the braid and slumps back into his chair, fingers ghosting over the keyboard. Tommy wonders if he should tell Techno about *Hive*. That name still makes him want to laugh. He starts to type and pointedly keeps his eyes on the screen. “Techno, I’m only going to say this once. You were right.”

“Of course I was,” Techno says. “About what?”

Tommy looks away, only looking back to his laptop to keep writing. “Tubbo seems to have appointed himself as my guy in the chair,” he says, and Techno’s face is the epitome of exasperation. “He doesn’t know my identity, don’t get me wrong, I’m not *that* bad at this alter ego thing. But... he *did* install comms in my new suit, and I cannot find them for the life of me, which means he’s pulled a Tubbo and done something annoyingly intelligent.”

Stifling a laugh, Techno brings his fist to his mouth. “He... he Tommy-proofed your suit,” he says, voice shaking with barely-concealed chuckles, and Tommy kicks at his ankles before returning to his essay. Techno clears his throat. “Seriously, though, I told you so.”

Tommy groans and throws his head back. “I *know*, just help me with my essay and leave me to wallow,” he huffs. Techno rolls his eyes, but he leans forward slightly anyway, eyes scanning over what Tommy’s already written. “You can tell me if it’s bad, big man, I can take it.”

“It’s not *bad*, you just talk in circles here... and here. But you can fix that no problem,” Techno says, and Tommy huffs. He hates essays.

At least holding a building together had at least been less tedious than *this* shit.

Hm, I wonder what lingering mental detriment will come from
singlehandedly holding up a collapsing building.

would it be daft of me to cry?

Chapter 16: would it be daft of me to cry?

Benchtrio makes a reluctant friend (?) and Tommy struggles with the effects of immense anxiety fueled by life-or-death situations.

Y'all know that feeling when your older sibling's friends unofficially adopt you as their little brother? Because Tommy does :)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Tommy isn't entirely sure what's happening.

It's lunch, and Tubbo is currently pleading for Ranboo to bring his high-powered microscope over and look at what Tommy knows is a sample from 404's spore gun, but Tubbo is only referring to it as 'mushrooms from the backyard.' Ranboo, of course, is understandably skeptical of this. And, for some reason, Purpled is sitting at their table today, albeit a good ten feet away from them.

"I'm telling you, it's not a prank! I legitimately just want to know what kind of mushroom the spores came from," Tubbo protests, and Ranboo buries his face in his hands. "Ranboo, if I wanted to prank you, this is *not* the way I'd do it."

"I know, and that's exactly why I'm being cautious," Ranboo tells him flatly, and Tommy snorts, choking on his Coke slightly. Ranboo glares at him, and Tommy puts his hands up. He's got no dog in this fight, thanks. "Are you in on this? What does he *actually* want?"

Tommy shrugs. "Fuck if I know, man. If this were a prank, though, Big T probably wouldn't look like he's one minute away from kidnapping you and forcing you to sit in his room and inspect some mushrooms at gunpoint," he says, taking a massive bite of his sandwich so that he's no longer forced to contribute to the conversation.

Tubbo pulls on Ranboo's arm with both hands and leans back in his seat. Ranboo hardly reacts, only shaking his head slightly as he takes a sip of water. "C'mon, bossman, just do me this one favor! I'll get you as many American sweets as I can buy," he promises, and Tommy frowns a little at that. Tubbo shouldn't be spending his own money to help out Tommy's alter ego; that's kind of the opposite of what Tommy's going for here.

"I cannot be bought," Ranboo answers easily, and Tommy snorts. Good on him, honestly. Alas, Ranboo is the only one out of the three of them that's actually pretty good at biology-Tommy would normally go to him for help with classes, but Techno's pretty good at it too, so he doesn't bother to bug Ranboo about it. Tubbo pouts, but Ranboo is still unconvinced. "I'm not gonna look at your weird shrooms, dude. On the off chance that you're actually *not* trying to prank me, I still don't trust whatever you've got growing in your yard."

Scoffing, Tubbo turns to his own lunch and scowls. "I'll just do it myself, then. If I happen to accidentally ingest some, and if it just so happens to be poisonous, I suppose you'll just have to live with that," he says, and Ranboo groans.

Tommy grimaces. That's a noise of defeat and acceptance for sure. "Fine," Ranboo mumbles, and Tubbo grins, taking a triumphant bite of what looks like leftovers from one of Puffy's signature pre-prepared dinners. Ranboo shoves his bag of crisps at Tommy, and he pounces on them, shoving a couple in his mouth and making a face when the sweet and tangy taste of barbeque hits his tongue. He passes the bag back. Ranboo looks surprised. "I thought these were your favorite?"

"Too sweet," Tommy explains, and Ranboo hums, brows furrowed as he takes the bag and eats a few crisps. Tubbo's practically buzzing with excitement, sketching something frantically. He has a

feeling he'll be getting a new piece of suit equipment soon. "You look like somebody just gave you a winning lottery ticket, man, it's just mushrooms."

"Fuck off, Tommy," Tubbo says, and Ranboo sighs.

"All three of you are morons," Purpled chimes in from the end of the table, and they turn to look at him. Tommy's brow furrows as Purpled reaches into his backpack, grabs a book, and slides it down the table to them. "Detailed guide of fungi species. Now you don't have to argue while I'm trying to eat."

Ranboo takes the book curiously, and Tubbo scoffs. "Why are you even *sitting* here, then? And who carries around a book of fungi species with them?!" he asks, and Tommy laughs around another bite of his sandwich. Purpled just flips them off and turns back to his food and his phone. Fair enough, in Tommy's opinion. Tubbo scowls, snatching the book from Ranboo and flipping through it.

Tommy scoots down a few seats towards Purpled and looks at him, *really* looks at him. The kid is an enigma; whatever had happened during his and Tubbo's project together had made Tubbo *hate* the guy. "Go back to your trash heap, raccoon boy," Purpled tells him without looking up from his phone, and Tommy frowns.

"What's your deal?" Tommy says, more curious than accusatory, and Purpled looks up at him then, face flat. "I meant, like, why are you sitting over here? You've never sat with us before."

"One of the new teachers keeps standing over where I usually sit. I didn't want the trouble," he answers, gesturing over his shoulder at a table towards the very back, and sure enough, Mr. Jacobs is standing there, arms crossed as he casually leans against the wall. In all honesty, he's not that intimidating. Tommy raises his brows, and Purpled shrugs. "You guys are the only people I know. Figured you two wouldn't mind, and Tubbo would just have to deal with it."

Narrowing his eyes, Tommy takes one of the nuggets off of Purpled's tray. "Table tax," he says, and Purpled nods. So they have reached an understanding. Tommy moves back to his usual seat and folds his hands on the table in front of him. "Gentlemen, I vote

we let him stay.”

Tubbo glares at him. “You’re only saying that because he paid the table tax,” he grumbles, and Tommy just shrugs. So what if he can be won over by people allowing him to steal from them?

“To be fair, I got to stay because I paid the table tax too,” Ranboo chimes in, and Tommy grins at him. He turns back to his lunch bag, knowing Techno had slipped him a pack of beef jerky before he’d left for class, only to find nothing left in it. Ranboo’s brows furrow. “You good, dude?”

Tommy groans. “Wilbur must’ve taken it, he’s such a fuckin’-ugh,” he groans, and he stands up, crumpling up the paper bag. He usually dreads missing any part of lunch, but he’s *really* hungry today, and Wilbur had taken the one thing Tommy had *really* been looking forward to. “See you guys in class if I don’t make it back. Don’t wait up.”

Tubbo waves and Ranboo sends him a sympathetic glance as Tommy makes his way out of the cafeteria and down the hall. Normally, Tommy wouldn’t have cared if Wilbur had taken something out of his bag-Wilbur always takes the sweets, anyway, and Tommy can’t exactly enjoy those anymore-but Techno had put the beef jerky in his lunch for a *reason*, dammit.

And Tommy’s not about to keep denying himself enough food to keep up with his metabolism.

“Tommy!” someone chirps from behind him, and while it doesn’t sound like he’s about to get scolded, Tommy remains wary as he turns to face Deputy Head Charlie. Ah. “You’re supposed to be in the cafeteria, aren’t you? Dap me up!”

Charlie offers his arm, and Tommy... daps him up. He assumes that’s what Charlie’s trying to do, anyway. “I am, but I’m going to the staff room because Wi-Mr. Soot took part of my lunch this morning and I didn’t notice until now,” Tommy explains, not really sure if Charlie’s one of those kinds of teachers that balk at the use of another teacher’s first name, and Charlie nods.

He adjusts his neon green suspenders, which are never *not* goofy-looking, and grins. "Why don't I come with you?" Charlie offers, and Tommy shrugs. He doesn't see why not. Charlie's turned out to be pretty harmless so far, all things considered; a little absent-minded, but ultimately pretty easy to get around if Tommy's nice enough while he's sneaking out. Charlie hums idly as they walk down the hall together. "So... is everyone in your family so tall?"

A surprised laugh leaves Tommy, and he shakes his head. "Ah, no, Ph-my dad and my mum are both shorter than me and my brothers," he says, and Charlie narrows his eyes in confusion. Tommy feels The Sense pull at the back of his head, and he gets the sudden feeling that he should change the subject away from his family, and *quickly*. "How are you settling in? This place can be a bit of a shithole sometimes. Uh, I mean-"

"Don't worry, I've heard Quackity from the front office say much worse," Charlie says easily, and Tommy doesn't really know how to respond to that. "Wilbur from room eight-oh-two is your brother, huh? That's interesting."

"Yeah," Tommy says, and The Sense thrums dully. "I guess so...?"

Charlie waves his hands in front of him quickly and smiles apologetically. "Sorry if I sound weird! I'm still getting used to this Deputy Head thing. I'm also still learning my way around, and I like to keep track of the staff to make Quackity from the front office's job easier," he elaborates, and Tommy honestly has no idea what to do with that either. Talking at length with Charlie is fucking *weird*.

They reach the staff room, and Charlie holds the door open for him. There are a few teachers in there, Wilbur included. Tommy scowls and starts to march over, but he's abruptly interrupted by Ms. Saumon, who grins at him. "Hey, kiddo! Here to see your brother?" she asks, slinging an arm around his shoulders with ease, and Tommy smiles back at her, nodding.

Ms. Saumon jerks her head to the table Wilbur's at, and they walk over, Wilbur looking positively mortified at the two of them getting along. "I would like my food back, bitch," Tommy says, and the teachers that know him snicker quietly at Wilbur's exasperation.

The one that's new-that ginger that Tommy still doesn't know the name of, crosses his arms and furrows his brow. "You can't use that kind of language in here, and especially not to a teacher, understand?" he asks, and Tommy stifles a laugh.

"Don't mind Tommy, he does this all the time," Sam interjects, walking past to get to the coffee machine and ruffling Tommy's hair as he does. The ginger still looks huffy. Sam shakes his head and claps a hand on the ginger's shoulder. "Seriously, Fundy. Wilbur's his brother. Tommy visits us, like, twice a week."

The ginger-Fundy-goes a bit pink in the face and abruptly turns away. Ms. Saumon chuckles, shaking her head. She turns to Wilbur, and Tommy rolls his eyes as Wilbur's face goes red almost immediately. "You oughta give him his food back, Soot, I can't have my best athlete going hungry on me," she says, and Tommy grins wickedly.

Wilbur looks about three more seconds of humiliation away from jumping across the table to throttle him. "You heard her, Wil, I'm a growing boy. I need my nutrition," Tommy says, and Ms. Saumon turns her head to hide her laughter.

"Is Tommy in here?" Niki's voice asks from the doorway, and Tommy turns to her. She brightens up and sweeps him into a hug. "Hey! If I'd known you were gonna join us today, I'd have brought you cookies!"

He's about to respond, but Charlie re-enters the conversation abruptly. "Niki from room eight hundred, you know Tommy too?" he asks, head tilted, and she grins, nodding.

"Of course I know Tommy, everybody knows Tommy," she says, and Tommy goes a bit pink with embarrassment as she pats his cheek and passes him a wrapped baked good that he's fairly certain had supposed to have been part of her own lunch. "Oh! That reminds me, Wil, are you gonna bring him bowling with us like you'd said?"

Wilbur has slammed his head onto the tabletop, and Tommy cackles, half-bent with his arms around himself as he tries to quell

his laughter. "I didn't *tell* him, because I don't want him to come with us," he mumbles, muffled slightly by the table, and Ms. Saumon tuts; Wilbur's head shoots up. "B-But if you want me to bring him, I'd be happy to, Sally!"

"Could he be any more obvious?" Niki murmurs, and Tommy stifles a laugh behind his hand as Ms. Saumon beams at Wilbur, who practically melts. Hopeless, absolutely hopeless. Niki clears her throat and holds a hand out in front of Wilbur, who looks confused for a brief moment, then, pouting, he hands her the still-unopened packet of jerky, and she hands it to Tommy. "Here you are, Toms. Say hi to Ranboo and Tubbo for me, yeah?"

"Will do," Tommy says, and he gives the teachers a two-fingered salute before heading out again, no longer trailed by Charlie, who'd thankfully chosen to remain in the staff room. He heads back to the cafeteria, and he settles back down at the table, waving the two newly acquired snacks in triumph. "Fellas, I have once again emerged victorious. Also, Niki says hi."

Ranboo and Tubbo grin. Tommy goes to take a sip of his Coke, but the bell rings, and everyone starts to get up. Their footsteps make the floor feel like it's rumbling, and Tommy's ears start ringing. Before he knows it, the Coke can pops, and his hand is dripping with soda. Tubbo and Ranboo are staring at him with concern, neither of them really sure of what to do, and Tommy laughs nervously, dropping the mutilated can on the table.

Mr. Jacobs taps him on the shoulder, and Tommy nearly jumps out of his skin. "Hey, are you alright? I can send you to the nurse if you need," he says, and Tommy shakes his head.

"No, no, I'm-I'm fine," he says, and Tubbo puts a hand on his arm. Mr. Jacobs looks hesitant to let him leave, so Tommy smiles and hopes it doesn't seem shaky. "Just nervous about a quiz, that's all. Sorry if that was-if I scared you."

He gathers his things and starts to leave. "Tommy, if you're... if you're having trouble with panic attacks..." Ranboo starts, and Tommy scoffs. That's not what had happened at all. That's not a panic attack, that'd be blowing it way out of proportion. Tommy had

just... remembered something bad and gotten a little startled, that's all.

"I'm alright, big man," Tommy says, "seriously."

Ranboo doesn't quite seem to believe him, but he drops the subject anyway.

Tommy is currently stewing in anxiety.

Wilbur's supposed to be handing back their results today, and while Techno's tutoring had helped a great deal, he's still not *entirely* confident that he'd done well. His leg bounces underneath his desk as Wilbur starts to hand back papers at the front of the class. Ranboo tilts his head curiously, and Tommy flips him off.

"Haven't you been studying for, like, a month? You probably at *least* passed," Ranboo says, and Tommy knows this is reasonable, yet his mind is still telling him he's definitely failed. Tubbo glances over his shoulder at them-Wilbur had moved him towards the front to try and curb the note passing. Ranboo waves dismissively, and Tubbo turns back around. Wilbur gets closer to their row, and Tommy's leg bouncing intensifies. If he's fucked up this as well, there's no hope for his grade, he'll have to retake the class or take it again over the summer, which means he won't see his friends or get to patrol as often, and then- "Tommy, you're hyperventilating."

"Fuck," Tommy breathes out, and Ranboo reaches over to gently put his hand on Tommy's arm; that in itself feels like too much *and* too little. Tommy's got no idea why he's so worked up over this. Well, actually, he *does*, it's for all those reasons he'd just listed in his head, and he supposes his grade has never depended on just one quiz, like this one must, but he shouldn't be *this* stressed over it.

Wilbur starts at the end of their row, and Tommy's throat feels like it's going to close up any second now. Ranboo pulls his hand away, and Tommy feels both relieved and disappointed at the loss of contact. "Well done, Ranboo, as usual," Wilbur says with a wink and a smile, and Ranboo lights up. Wilbur hands Tommy's paper back

face-down. *Fuck*.

As Wilbur moves to the next person in their row, Tommy stares down at his desk and the offending white rectangle on top of it. His vision starts to blur, and he vaguely registers Ranboo scooting his chair closer in his peripheral vision. Tommy's fists are clenched, slightly trembling, and he blinks rapidly. Ranboo puts a hand on his shoulder. "Tommy, it's okay, here, why don't we look through it together, see if we can-"

"*Fuck*," Tommy chokes. Ranboo falls silent as Tommy buries his face in his hands. He's fucked it up again. He keeps making *mistakes*. And this isn't even the first time Tommy's done everything in his power *not* to fuck things up! Maybe that's his real superpower.

"Do... do you want me to look for you?" Ranboo offers, and Tommy takes a shaky, deep breath as he nods. He can't start fucking crying in English lit, this isn't-it's still fixable, he can do something, ask for extra credit, study more. Ranboo takes the paper slowly, and he barks out a surprised laugh. Tommy's stomach swoops; he *knows* he did horribly, but Ranboo doesn't have to *laugh* at him. "Tommy. You did perfect. Full marks, man."

Shoulders dropping along with his hands, Tommy stares wide-eyed at Ranboo, who gives him an easy smile and hands over the quiz. Tommy takes another shaky breath, eyes widening at the number written in Wilbur's messy scrawl at the top. "Full marks," he whispers, incredulous, and Ranboo punches his arm playfully. Tommy feels a wave of relief crash over him, and he starts laughing, probably too loudly, but he can't bring himself to care.

"Settle down, Thomas," Wilbur says, and Tommy can't even get annoyed. He's done it-there's hope for his grades yet.

Ranboo's still looking at him funny, but that doesn't matter. Tommy's going to buy Techno *so* many swords. "Listen, I'm bringing my microscope to Tubbo's later, so it can't be today, but if you ever want to have, like, a study session, I'd be down for that," he says, and Tommy smiles at him. He probably won't be able to take him up on the offer between patrols and Techno's tutoring, but he's thankful for it nonetheless.

Wilbur starts talking about something or another up at the board, and Tommy tunes it out, still hyper-focused on the number that's currently his main source of happiness. That's probably an unhealthy attachment, but Tommy doesn't care, he's just so *relieved* he'd passed. Phil's gonna be so proud of him-Kristin will be too! Techno's going to pretend like he doesn't care, but Tommy will know that he's proud anyway, and-

"Would you care to join us back on earth, space cadet?" Wilbur's voice cuts into his thoughts, and Tommy blinks, cheeks heating up. He slumps down in his seat, and Wilbur chuckles lightly, turning back towards the board.

Tommy stews in a mix of silence, anger, and elation for the rest of class. Silence, because obviously, he can't talk. He's in class. Anger, because Wilbur's being a bitch even *after* Tommy had evidently started to do well in class again. And elation, of course, because he's incredible and amazing and had saved his grade.

When class ends, Tommy marches up to Wilbur's desk and slams the paper down. "If I did *good*, do *not* give me a heart attack and hand it back face-down," he says, and Wilbur stifles a laugh behind his hand. Tommy frowns. "I'm serious! I was fuckin' panicking, man, even Ranboo was all worried n' shit."

Wilbur actually seems a little apologetic. "Oh," he says, and Tommy crosses his arms. Wilbur blinks, shaking his head. "Wait, Tommy, why would you be panicking over it?"

"Because I thought that meant my grade was doomed!" Tommy says, rather peeved, and Wilbur still looks confused. "I'm borderline failing-well, not after this, but-I thought I was screwed, man, I had no idea what I was going to do."

"Tommy, if I hadn't been confident that you could turn it around, I would have offered you extra credit *much* sooner. If any of my students aren't doing well, and that includes you, that's on me as a teacher," Wilbur says, and Tommy looks away. "I'm serious. We're only about halfway through 'til winter break, you're doing fine, you're on track to pass the class."

Well, that's a relief. "Okay," Tommy says, feeling kind of sheepish at how he'd blown things out of proportion so easily. "Uh. Thanks."

Brow furrowing, Wilbur claps a hand on Tommy's shoulder. "Are you alright? There's never any need to panic over a quiz in my class, *ever*, I won't let something like that make or break your grade," he says, and Tommy knows that... in retrospect. Wilbur's a good teacher, even if he's a bit of an ass to Tommy sometimes. Wilbur pulls Tommy in for a hug, and Tommy doesn't fight it, but he doesn't return it, either. He's too wrapped up in wondering what the hell's gotten into him lately. "Toms, I know that you don't want to... I know Techno's probably got it covered, but if you ever need to talk about what's bothering you..."

Tommy pulls back, clutching at his arms. "Yeah, no, I'm-I'm fine," he says, because logically, he should be. His grades are fine now, his hands have healed, he's been having a good day. "I'll see you at home, Wil."

Wilbur gnaws nervously at his bottom lip, clearly uncertain. "I think you might need to see a therapist," he says, and Tommy blinks in surprise. He doesn't need a therapist; he hadn't needed one when Phil had suggested it, and he definitely doesn't need one now. Wilbur puts his hands up placatingly. "I know you probably think you're fine, but... Toms, you're clearly not sleeping, your appetite is all over the place-first you weren't eating nearly enough and now you are-and I don't even *know* how many panic attacks you've had."

"No, Wil, I'm fine, honest," Tommy says, slightly frantic. If Wilbur brings it up to Phil, Phil will bring it up to Kristin, and then Techno might agree with them, and then Tommy won't have enough time to patrol on top of everything else, and the crime rates might rise again, and it'll be all his fault. "Seriously, I-I don't need a therapist, man, Phil already suggested it, I don't need one."

"Tommy, you're shaking," Wilbur says quietly, and Tommy concentrates on keeping his hands steady. "Is this... is it about what happened during the robbery?"

Swallowing around the lump in his throat, Tommy nods. "Yeah, that's probably it," he croaks, and he hates lying to Wilbur, at least

about the important stuff. Wilbur doesn't deserve that, but Tommy has to keep him safe, he *has* to, he's already putting Techno and Tubbo in danger, he can't let that happen to Wilbur as well. "I'll ask Tubbo if I can talk to Puffy about it."

The lie tastes like bile. Wilbur gets visibly relieved. "Good. That's a great idea, Tommy," he says, his smile soft and proud, and the knife twists just a little bit more. Tommy starts to head towards the door, but Wilbur puts a hand on his arm. "You're gonna be okay."

"I know," Tommy says, and he doesn't, "thanks, Wil."

Wilbur's still smiling, and Tommy heads out of the classroom. He's got maths next, so it's just a trip across the hall. It's easy. Even though the rumbling footsteps of the people still in the hall make his breathing shaky, even though someone laughing too loudly makes his ears ring, it's easy. Tommy sits in his usual seat next to Tubbo.

"Here," Tubbo says, and he hands Tommy a tiny paper... shape of some kind. Grinning sheepishly, Tubbo shrugs. "It's supposed to be a crane, but I kind of fucked it up."

Tommy snorts and fiddles with it for a minute, then tucks it carefully into his front pocket, taking caution not to crumple it. It's stupid, but he loves it. "Alright, everybody," Niki says, shuffling a stack of papers, "I've been told that we're supposed to talk about the fundraiser at the beginning of this class period, so thankfully, we can put off the actual work for a while."

Chuckling along with the rest of the class, Tommy leans back in his seat. "Wilbur says they're all volunteering, and they all have to wear uniforms. He won't let me see what it looks like, though, so it's probably fuckin' terrible," he mutters to Tubbo, who snorts.

Niki starts to pass out the sheets she's got, and Tommy's surprised to see that they're little flyers, cutely decorated and well put-together. The last fundraiser they'd had at the school had been an utterly disorganized disaster, but that's mostly due to the fact that their previous headteacher had been more focused on not getting sent to prison than a bake sale. Big Q's really turning things around.

“Right, now that you’ve all got your flyers, I’ll tell you about the carnival itself,” Niki says with a smile, and Tommy glances over at Tubbo to find him frantically sketching something; he assumes he’ll hear about it later. Niki claps her hands together, and she’s clearly pretty excited about the whole ordeal. “There’ll be stalls set up with games where you can all win prizes, rides that you can purchase additional tickets for after you’ve run out of the ones we give you when you enter, and plenty of other attractions!”

Purpled raises his hand, surprisingly, and Niki nods at him. “Is attendance mandatory?” he asks, and she shakes her head. Purpled hums. “Cool.”

“Entry tickets are twenty pounds each, and you don’t *have* to come, but it’ll be a lot of fun! Of course, if you’d like to attend but can’t because of the price, if you have an adult willing to volunteer, you can come for free,” Niki says, and Tommy leans his cheek against his palm. This is kind of boring, and he might not be able to go depending on how patrol goes that day, but he doesn’t want to *not* pay attention in Niki’s class, she’s too nice. “I’ll be there as a volunteer, as will most of your teachers, so come say hi! Additional ride tickets are ten for five pounds, and you can go into the attractions for free as many times as you want.”

“What kind of attractions are there, Ms. Nihachu?” one girl asks, her hand in the air, and Niki grins.

“Oh, there are so many! We’re getting a funhouse, a bouncy castle for the little kids, spinning teacups, a mini-coaster, a pirate ship ride,” Niki lists, and there’s some excited chatter starting up amongst the class. Tommy has to admit, that *does* sound pretty fun. Niki gestures for them to quiet down, and they do. “The one I’m most excited for is the hall of mirrors, but there’s going to be so many more I haven’t even mentioned! There will be food and drink booths, and the money that doesn’t go towards paying for the carnival itself will be put towards upgrading our gym equipment, our marching band’s instruments, and better computers for the computer lab.”

At that, Tubbo perks up, as does Ranboo. Tubbo raises his hand, and Niki nods for him to go ahead. “How long is it going to last for?” he asks, and Niki hums, glancing down at her desk.

She frowns thoughtfully down at whatever she's looking at, then gives him a smile. "It'll be from five in the evening until midnight," she says, and Tubbo nods, returning to his frantic doodling. "It's happening on Halloween, for those of you that were absent for the initial announcement."

As she goes on to answer questions about bringing siblings, more specifications about the attractions, and about the volunteer schedule, Tommy glances over at Tubbo. He can't curb his curiosity for much longer. "What're you sketching like a madman over there?" he asks, keeping his voice as quiet as possible.

"It's a prototype gas mask for you-know-who," Tubbo whispers back, and Tommy blinks in surprise. Ah, right. Tubbo had said he'd wanted to design a gas mask for him to use in fights against 404. Ranboo, on Tubbo's other side, glances over, brows furrowed in confusion. Tubbo waves him off. "Don't worry about it, bossman."

Ranboo sighs, and Tommy feels a bit bad for keeping him out of the loop. Then again, it's just to keep him safe; he'd taken a massive risk when he'd let Tubbo continue to be his guy in the chair.

He can't do that to anyone else.

He just can't.

Wilbur, innocently trying to play a bit of a brotherly prank: :D

Tommy, still trying to cope with the immense load of stress he's found himself buried under:...

Also, can you tell that Charlie's easily one of my favorite characters from the Dream SMP? Go, you funky little slime boy, go!!

i want to know if it's true.

Chapter 17: i want to know if it's true.

Ranboo brings his microscope over to Tubbo's house.

We hit 500 kudos omg!! That's absolutely insane, thank you all so so much for all of your comments and feedback <3 I love reading your theories and seeing your reactions to the way I've written everyone, and I'm so glad you all seem to like the story :D

Also, I am currently shielding my poor boy Wilbur from y'all, he isn't doing anything wrong on purpose, he just genuinely doesn't know what Tommy's going through!!!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Ranboo lives a pleasantly average life as a pretty average guy.

Well, maybe not average in *every* way, he's pretty darn tall, to be fair. But for the most part, Ranboo's life is perfectly ordinary, and he likes it that way. Which is why, when Tubbo asks him to look at mushroom spores after school, he's hesitant. Ranboo likes to think of himself as a guy with a decent amount of common sense, and his common sense says that Tubbo 'discovering' a weird mushroom in his backyard and being *so* curious about it that he practically pleads for Ranboo to tell him what it is can only mean bad news.

Unfortunately for Ranboo, he also likes to think of himself as a pretty good friend, which means putting up with the occasional shenanigan

that Tubbo and-slash-or Tommy happen to drag him into. So here he is, standing on Tubbo's doorstep with his very expensive and delicate microscope cradled in his arms and waiting for him to open the door.

"Just a minute!" comes Tubbo's very frantic voice from somewhere inside, followed by several deeply concerning crashes, then a solid ten seconds of silence. Ranboo sighs as thudding footsteps get closer to the door. "I'm okay!"

The door swings open after just a moment more, and Ranboo nods in greeting, since his hands are full. Tubbo eagerly ushers him in, and Ranboo follows him up to his room. "So are you ever going to tell me what this is *actually* about?" he asks, and Tubbo just grins over his shoulder at him. Ranboo rolls his eyes. "Is Tommy coming later?"

"Probably not," Tubbo says, and Ranboo can tell that Tubbo's probably still a little bitter over being ditched so many times. He clears out a spot on his desk, and Ranboo gently sets down the microscope. He's not entirely sure if this will end in disaster, but there's a good thirty percent chance that it'll at least end in mushroom spores being spilled everywhere. Tubbo rushes over to the closet, digging through a bag *very* loudly. "Just a second! I think it's in here somewhere...? Aha!"

Holding up a little vial of a gaseous, green substance that Ranboo does *not* trust at all, Tubbo grins triumphantly. This can't mean anything good. "Do you have a slide to put it on?" he asks, taking the vial and starting to open it, but Tubbo frantically grabs his wrists to stop him.

Tubbo laughs nervously, and Ranboo lets him take the vial back. Okay, now he *definitely* doesn't want any part of this. "Let me just... is it at all possible for you to take a look at it while it's still in the tube?" he asks, and Ranboo nods hesitantly. It'll be a pain to have to hold it still, and he'll have to account for the image being slightly warped, but it's possible. Tubbo sets the vial under the microscope, and Ranboo starts adjusting the settings.

"How magnified do we want it?" Ranboo asks, and Tubbo shrugs a

little helplessly. "Right, um, I guess I'll just... I'll just use each setting, then."

He adjusts the lenses, then works on focusing the image, huffing a little as the vial starts to slip slightly. Thankfully, Tubbo moves in to hold it still for him, which means Ranboo can use both of his hands; that'll make things much easier. "What d'you see, bossman?" Tubbo asks, sounding pretty hopeful as he props Purpled's fungi book on the desk next to them with his free hand, and Ranboo's brow furrows.

"Looks like..." he trails off, glancing over at the book. The spores are feather-like, the thin white strands drifting gently through whatever gaseous substance it's housed in. Ranboo skims through a couple of the pages of the book, frowning in concentration. There are a couple of spores in the book that are similar, but Ranboo keeps flipping until he finds the most accurate one he can. "These are probably fly agaric mushrooms, judging by the spores, but there's something off about them. Let me zoom in more."

He does, and he focuses the image until he can see properly. Now, Ranboo does *not*, in fact, consider himself an expert on biology, let alone mycology, but he knows that something is absolutely incorrect here. When he leans back, brows furrowed, Tubbo tilts his head. "What's up? What are you seeing?" he asks, and Ranboo hums in uncertainty, going back to look at the sample again. "Is it just... it's normal, right?"

"No, it's got... if I didn't know better I'd say these are melatonin receptors and releasers," Ranboo says, but that's literally scientifically impossible. That *cannot* be it. He stands upright again, and he crosses his arms as he tries to think of something else it could be. Tubbo still looks confused, so Ranboo decides he should probably elaborate, at least a little. "Basically, plants and people have different hormones and hormone receptors. So, like, if you were to eat a plant with a lot of a certain plant-specific hormone, you wouldn't get the effects of it, since you don't have the right receptor. But these have *human* melatonin receptors and releasers, and a lot of them at that, meaning if you were to accidentally ingest or inhale them, then..."

And then it hits him. Tubbo *definitely* didn't find these mushrooms. As if Tubbo can sense Ranboo's realization, he puts his hands up placatingly and grins. "Listen, these may or may not be spores from-"

"That supervillain," Ranboo finishes for him, pressing his fingers to his temples. He'd thought Tubbo's danger-seeking streak had died down somewhat, but apparently it's back in full force, judging by the fact that he's got a sample of whatever the hell that 404 guy has been using to knock people out. "Tubbo, are you kidding me?! That's so *dangerous*, I can't believe you would *steal* genetically modified mushroom spores-well, no, actually, I *can* believe it."

Tubbo sighs. "Ranboo, I promise, I'm being careful. And I didn't even put myself in any danger to get this! Well, not really anyway, Spider-Man doesn't want me putting myself in danger," he says, ending in a mumble, and Ranboo shakes his head. Honestly, he still doesn't understand why Tubbo's kept such a high opinion of the guy this whole time.

There's no reasonable explanation as to why the government's currently letting a vigilante in a mask run around 'solving' crimes. And his initial prediction had been right-with a superhero comes supervillains, and Ranboo knows that he, for one, would very much *not* like to be on the receiving end of whatever kinds of weapons these guys have. It would naturally follow that Ranboo doesn't exactly want his friends to be either.

While Ranboo respects what Spider-Man does, and is grateful that he at least has the good sense to tell Tubbo not to endanger himself, he's not about to put an unshakable trust in a random superpowered individual who could easily turn on the public if provoked. He's *fine* for now, but that could change, and Ranboo doesn't want to feel betrayed if and when it does.

Ranboo's trying to think of how to properly convey this, because he's tried before to no avail, when there's an odd beep coming from Tubbo's speakers. "What's that?" he asks, and Tubbo looks *way* too panicked for it to be anything Ranboo wants to be a part of.

Tubbo's setup is incredibly impressive; he's built it up slowly over

the years. It's got four monitors and two keyboards, and his PC sends a shiver down Ranboo's spine whenever he thinks about just how much of a tank that thing is. And, clearly, a new alert system. Ranboo isn't naive enough to hope that it's not in regards to Spider-Man's antics.

"It's nothing!" Tubbo answers, but he *does* plug his headphones in, snatches the spore sample out from under the microscope, and immediately starts pushing Ranboo towards the door. He really has no sense of subtlety.

Squirming out of his grasp, Ranboo heads over to the computer. In spite of his better judgement, which is telling him to leave this *alone*, so he can continue minding his own business in peace and quiet, he wiggles the mouse, and the monitors light up with databases, radar maps, and crime alerts. And an incoming call from-

"Hive! Thank fuck you picked up, man," says a voice, very quiet but still distinct enough to hear from the headphones, and Ranboo's brows furrow. Tubbo dashes over and starts to wrestle for the headphones, but Ranboo puts up as good of a fight as he can. What the heck is going *on*, and why doesn't Tubbo want him to know about it?! Ranboo shoves the headphones over his ears and glares at Tubbo in defiance. *"Hive, are you there?! I'm losing this guy, man, I need you to track his car!"*

"Uh... who's this?" Ranboo asks, wondering what kind of crime ring Tubbo's evidently trying to infiltrate, and the person on the other end of the line makes a choking noise. "Hello?"

Tubbo finally succeeds at yanking the headphones off of Ranboo's head and promptly shoves him out of the way, sitting down and typing frantically. "You're on with Hive, sorry about that, bossman," he says, and Ranboo sputters out a few incoherent noises. What is *happening* right now?! Tubbo glances back at him, bottom lip worried between his teeth, then turns his full attention to the computer again. "No, no, it's nobody, I was trying out a voice changer."

Ranboo frowns. First of all, who's Tubbo talking to that apparently needs to track a car?! And second of all, it's so *weird* that Tubbo is

denying he's even here. That, coupled with the thing about the mushrooms, it almost makes him think that-

Oh, you have *got* to be kidding.

"You're on a call with Spider-Man!" Ranboo accuses, and Tubbo tenses up, but his typing doesn't pause.

He does, however, grimace. "Yeah, okay, maybe I lied," he says, and Ranboo assumes he's talking to Spider-Man, but it still applies to their conversation, so he crosses his arms anyway. Tubbo groans, double-clicks on one of his little radar maps, and turns towards Ranboo. "Hang on-yeah, no, I'll be... no, I *know*, I'm not stupid, man. Yeah. Okay, fuck's sakes, give me a second, let me talk to him. Right, look, I know you're probably pissed-"

"That doesn't even *begin* to describe it," Ranboo says. He runs a hand through his hair nervously and his shoulders go tense. Fuck, this is *bad*. "You're aiding and abetting somebody that probably qualifies as operating against the law! You're *actively endangering yourself*, of course I'm mad! I'm worried! What are you *thinking*?!"

Sheepishly, Tubbo presses a button on his keyboard and slides the headphones off. "I wasn't muted yet," he says, embarrassed, and Ranboo almost laughs. But this isn't funny, Tubbo's working with some masked stranger who, evidently, knows who he is and where he lives, if the delivered spores are any indication, meaning he could be in *so much danger* if it came down to it. Tubbo folds his hands on the desk and sighs. "Ranboo, I'm... this is *important* to me."

Resisting the urge to shake Tubbo by the shoulders until he comes to his senses, Ranboo just shakes his head and lets his arms go limp by his sides. "I know it is, but it's... Tubbo, this is unreasonable. I mean, c'mon, there's no good outcome to this," he pleads, hoping that Tubbo will at least *try* to hear him out here. "Best case scenario, nothing happens, but the worst case?! I don't even want to *think* about it, not when there are supervillains running around!"

"And I get that," Tubbo says, clearly frustrated, which Ranboo honestly thinks he has very little right to be, all things considered. "Look, I'm doing what I think is right. I understand that you don't trust

Spider-Man, and I can follow your logic there, I respect your position, but this isn't just me doing something impulsive, I've been *careful*, I'm taking every precaution possible. And I want to help Spider-Man do what he does more efficiently. I want to help him so that *he* can help more people. Ranboo, I want to-I wanna be *part* of something."

"Why does it have to be *this*?" Ranboo asks, defeated, because there's nothing else to say. Tubbo's clearly made up his mind.

Shoulders slightly hunched, Tubbo looks at each of his monitors. "Because this is what I'm good at, man. I'm *damn* good with this shit. Nobody can do the job better than me," Tubbo says, and Ranboo bites back the urge to tell him that somebody *has* to be, because there *has* to, there's gotta be someone who could do this instead of Tubbo, someone to endanger themselves that isn't his best friend. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to help stop a carjacker."

Tubbo goes to put the headphones back on, but Ranboo stops him. "Let me listen in," he says, and Tubbo hesitates. He wants to know the extent of what's going on. While he'd much rather prefer to keep his life as normal as possible, Ranboo's a little tired of being in the dark.

Still unsure, Tubbo unplugs the headphones, and Ranboo's immediately hit with the sounds of sirens, cars whizzing by, and other assorted London noises. The audio matches the rightmost monitor, which is a camera view from what's probably Spider-Man's mask. Tubbo grabs the mic and pulls it towards himself, turning back towards the monitors and typing frantically. "This is Hive, checking in, what's your progress?" Tubbo asks, and Ranboo watches as two little dots on the map in the corner of the center monitor blink in and out of sight.

"*Fuckin' slow! I mean, I'm going, like, thirty kilometers at least, but I can't get the up on this dickhead!*" Spider-Man says, and Ranboo's a little startled by the profanity. The guy seems so polite whenever he's being interviewed by whatever reporters can manage to pull him into a chat. "*Is there anywhere I can cut him off?*"

Tubbo and Ranboo both turn to look at the leftmost monitor, and

Tubbo's eyes narrow, like he's searching for something. He probably is. "You're gonna wanna turn to the right, there's an alleyway there where you can cut him off, and it's a one-way, he'll be forced right into it," he says, and Ranboo's never seen Tubbo so focused.

"*On it!*" Spider-Man says, and there's the *whoosh* of wind flooding the speakers. Ranboo watches as the camera footage veers to the right, and Tubbo's mouth quirks up in a triumphant smile. The feed shows the speeding-stolen-car head straight for Spider-Man, and Ranboo has to turn away at the motion blur as Spider-Man drops down on the hood of the car, smashes his fist through a window, and yanks the guy out. "*Looks like somebody's been playing a bit too much GTA, hm?*"

"*Fuck you!*" is all the guy manages to get out before he's being webbed to the side of the alley, and Ranboo's eyes go wide as Spider-Man hops right into the car through the busted window.

There are gloved hands on the wheel-Ranboo is completely bewildered, it's like watching a video game cutscene with *scarily* good graphics-and Spider-Man's voice sounds slightly panicked as it comes through the speakers. "*Uh, do you happen to know how to drive?*" he asks, and Ranboo covers his face with his hands. This isn't going to end well.

"How do you not know how to drive?!" Tubbo demands, and Ranboo would also very much like to know the answer to that. But he stays silent, peeking at the screen through his fingers. "Just hit the brakes!"

"*Alright, well, which one is the brake?!*" Spider-Man asks, frazzled, and Ranboo tries his hardest not to groan, because he's not supposed to be listening in on this, but Tubbo is more than reactionary enough for the both of them.

"Are you shitting me?! How the fuck do you not know where the brake is?!" Tubbo shouts, and Ranboo slumps into a crouch. Okay, maybe if Spider-Man is *this* clueless, he really *does* need Tubbo's help. "It's the-oh, *shit*, of *course* I can't remember now, what the fuck?!"

"You're both hopeless, the brake pedal is the one to the left of the accelerator!" Ranboo shouts, finally fed up and anxious enough to say something, because the car is going towards the dead end of the alley *really* quickly.

Spider-Man visibly flinches on the camera feed. "*Wh-! Hive, is there somebody with you right now?!*" he asks, voice cracking, and Ranboo kind of wants to throttle this guy.

"You are in a car hurtling towards a wall at an ungodly speed, worry about that *after* you hit the brakes, you moron!" Tubbo bellows, and thankfully, Spider-Man has the good sense to listen, because Ranboo hears the telltale squeal of rubber as the car slows and slows, coming to a stop *just* before the brick. The tension leaves his body, and Ranboo slumps down on the ground. This is ridiculously stressful. Tubbo leans back in his chair, head tilted towards the ceiling. "Thank fucking God."

Ranboo can hear Spider-Man's slightly panicked breathing even out over the speakers. "*So. Are you... is there someone else there?*" he asks, and Tubbo groans. "*... I'll take that as a yes. Hive, I trust you, man, but I don't want to endanger more people.*"

Watching as Tubbo struggles to find something to say, Ranboo clears his throat. "Don't worry, I-I'm not gonna-this was a one-time thing. I have *zero* interest in ever dealing with something like this again," he says, and Spider-Man's fingers drum on the steering wheel on the monitor. It kind of surprises Ranboo; it's such a small, normal gesture. "And... trust me, I'm not going to tell *anyone* about this. I want no part of it."

There's silence for a moment. "*Hive. Do you... you trust this guy, yeah?*" Spider-Man asks, and there's something off about the question, like there's something he *wants* to say, but isn't saying it. Ranboo's brow furrows.

"I'd trust him with my life," Tubbo says easily, and Ranboo blinks in surprise. "He won't say anything, Spider-Man, I swear. He doesn't even like you, for one-"

"Well, that's not entirely true, I respect you, Mr. Spider-Man, and I

don't *dislike* you," Ranboo interrupts, slightly panicked. He shoves Tubbo's shoulder slightly. "Don't tell him I don't like him, that's not helping!"

There's a light, nervous chuckle from the speakers. "*I didn't realize there was anyone other than cops that didn't like me,*" Spider-Man jokes, and Ranboo feels a little bad. He watches as Spider-Man clammers out of the car and dusts his hands off in front of him. It's still so surreal to be watching it on Tubbo's monitor; he'll probably see it happen on the news later. "*Right, Hive, what's next?*"

Ranboo probably shouldn't be surprised, but he genuinely has no idea how Spider-Man's so ready to hop right back into the action. It's gotta be exhausting. Tubbo starts typing again, and Ranboo glances over to one of the left monitors, positively terrified to see weapons listings scroll by at an abnormal speed.

Tubbo hums. "Looks like Blaze and 404 aren't selling more weapons, which is both good *and* bad. Good for obvious reasons, bad because I *really* wanted to take a look at that electric thingy," he says, and Ranboo puts his head in his hands again. "But there *is* a robbery in progress-tiny shop, guy's only got a blade. Cops are about twenty minutes out, you could probably get there and end things before they even get into the car."

"*Show me the address,*" Spider-Man says, and Tubbo clicks, then types, then clicks again, and Ranboo watches as an almost cutesy little popup appears in the corner of the monitor with video feed. Tubbo grins proudly; it's a tiny, slightly transparent square, adorned with a spiderweb in the bottom left corner and a waving tarantula in the top right. Ranboo finds this both delightful and truly absurd. "*Any details I should know about?*"

"Nope," Tubbo says, popping the 'p,' and Ranboo finally takes a seat on the bed. He still keeps an eye on the video feed monitor-mostly because he can't keep up with whatever Tubbo's doing on the other ones-and fidgets with his hands. "Just your run-of-the-mill criminal."

Spider-Man sighs in relief-relief!-and chuckles under his breath. "*Thank fuck, I was hoping for something easy,*" he says, swinging towards where Ranboo assumes the store being robbed is. He *still*

doesn't know his way around London, and he's been here for a good few years. It's a wonder that Spider-Man's got so many streets memorized.

It's absolutely enrapturing to watch as Spider-Man bursts into the store, whipping a web at the robber like it's effortless, like this is just another Thursday for him-which it probably is-and starts joking around. "Does he always talk so much?" Ranboo mumbles, and Tubbo stifles a laugh behind his hand. Ranboo takes that as a yes.

"Oof, that one's gonna hurt in the morning, mate, let me get you some ice for it!" Spider-Man quips, attaching a web to a bag of ice and throwing it into the robber's chest. The guy finally goes down, and Spider-Man webs him to the floor as sirens finally start to approach. The video feed turns to the cashier, who looks put out at all the webbing on the floor. *"It'll come off! It dissolves after about two hours. Or just use his knife to cut through it if you don't want the trouble."*

That's actually kind of interesting; Ranboo doesn't follow Spider-Man news if he can help it, so he doesn't really know how Spider-Man's powers work. "Does Tu-uh, does *Hive* know how to make your webs?" he asks. He's a little curious as to what exactly Tubbo's responsible for, other than apparently telling Spider-Man where crimes are happening.

"Oh, I don't make his webs," Tubbo answers before Spider-Man can respond, and Ranboo watches as he starts to swing away from the store. "They're completely organic. Also, Spidey, there's a few muggings going on, but they're all pretty close to a precinct. You should grab something to eat, I'll look into the market some more to see if there's anything I missed with those arms deals we're investigating."

"The arms deals that I'm investigating," Spider-Man corrects, and Tubbo pouts. He swings down to a food truck. *"Good afternoon, miss, can I have... um..."*

As Spider-Man proceeds to give his order to the woman in the food truck, which is an absurd situation for Ranboo to be watching in Tubbo's bedroom, Tubbo starts to type, and Ranboo glares warily at

the sketchy-looking website on one of the monitors. "Right, Ranboo, you should probably get going," Tubbo says, holding down a key that's presumably for muting himself.

"Yeah, I-I don't think I really want to be here while you investigate the black market with a vigilante," Ranboo agrees, starting to gather up his things. He's shaking slightly, and he's not exactly *surprised* about that, but it makes it a lot harder to make sure he doesn't drop his very expensive microscope.

"Oh! I just remembered, would you mind running over Tommy's notebook? I borrowed it to copy his notes for the last class period, but I'm a little preoccupied," Tubbo says with a sheepish grin, and Ranboo sighs, but he takes it anyway. "Thanks, bossman! Ayup, Spidey, I'm back."

He leaves Tubbo to his devices, and he heads out, pausing to scream internally as soon as he's a little ways down the street. Thankfully, his microscope has not slipped out of his grip. Ranboo takes a few deep breaths and keeps walking, wondering what exactly he'd just bore witness to.

It's definitely not normal.

And the last thing Ranboo wants is for anyone to get hurt.

As long as Tubbo keeps this on the down low, he should be fine, right? And if he *were* in danger, Ranboo's, like, ninety-three percent certain that Spider-Man would be right there to save him, since Tubbo does important work for him. It's not as if Tubbo's helpless either, Ranboo knows perfectly well that he can take care of himself, he's just... worried. Really, *really* worried.

Ranboo likes his very average life, and it had already been thrown off-kilter when he'd helped Tubbo carry Spider-Man for a half a mile after the bank explosion, but apparently, nobody *else* wants to keep their own lives normal. Everyone's either arguing or running into danger or refusing to talk about their emotions, and Ranboo's struggling to play catch-up.

He's still worried about Tommy having and denying his panic

attacks, and he's stressed about the new staff at school, and there are literal *supervillains* now. Everything's so overwhelming all of the time, and Ranboo had thought he could rely on his friends to give him *some* sense of normalcy, but apparently Tubbo's working for *Spider-Man*, and Tommy's always inexplicably busy, so Ranboo's left alone to wonder what he's supposed to do about it.

But he knows his friends care about him, and if he voices it, they'd probably try to at *least* compromise to make things easier or try to fix things. And Ranboo doesn't want to pile even *more* on their plates. Instead, he'll mind his business like he always does, and he just hopes they'll come to him if they need anything.

As Ranboo turns onto Tommy's street, he almost bumps right into somebody. "Ah, I'm sorry, I was just-oh, hey, Purpled," he says, and Purpled nods up at him. "Sorry, I don't have your book, Tubbo's still got it."

Shrugging, Purpled kicks a pebble into the street. "It's whatever. I don't need it anytime soon," he says, and Ranboo chuckles nervously. "What'd you two need it for?"

Ranboo blinks at him. He can't exactly go around telling everyone he'd accidentally figured out how a supervillain's specialized weapon works. "Uh. Biology project," he says, and promptly remembers that he is not, in fact, currently taking biology, whereas Purpled is. "Not, like, a class project, because that would be a stupid thing to say, you know we're not taking bio-it was a personal project, Tubbo wants to do something with the mushrooms in his backyard, see, and-"

"Dude. I don't actually care," Purpled says. "I'm just being polite."

"Oh."

"Yeah, oh," Purpled echoes flatly, and Ranboo shifts.

This conversation is uncomfortable.

"I, uh, gotta get Tommy's notebook back to him," Ranboo says, smiling nervously even though Purpled can't see, and Purpled just shrugs again, walking right past him. What a weird dude. He makes

his way down to Tommy's house and rings the bell, slightly surprised to see Techno answering the door. "Hey, Techno, I've got Tommy's, um, notes. Tubbo forgot to give them back before school ended."

Techno glances back and holds up a finger, then promptly cups his hands around his mouth and turns towards the stairs. "Tommy! Your weird, tall friend is here!" he shouts, and Ranboo winces at the volume of it. Techno waits for a moment, then turns back to Ranboo. "He's not here right now. Come back later."

As he goes to close the door, Ranboo reaches out to grab it. "Wait! Can't I just... I dunno, go leave it in his room or something?" he asks, not really wanting to make three separate trips today. He wants to go home to process everything properly at *some* point. Techno frowns, but he lets Ranboo in anyway.

Ranboo heads up the stairs, slightly wary as Techno follows him, because he's barely ever spoken to Techno despite coming over here pretty frequently. Well, *less* frequently as of recent, but his point still stands. Techno stands in the doorway of Tommy's room as Ranboo sets the notebook down on his desk. Ranboo stifles a laugh behind his hand; the corner of it is still haphazardly glued together.

He glances up at Techno, who's typing something on his phone, and while he *does* wonder why exactly Techno's still standing here, he just turns back to the desk. Opening up his bookbag, Ranboo takes out a post-it and places it gently over the cover of the notebook.

Tubbo forgot to give this back to you after classes

-Ranboo :D

Smiling down at the note, Ranboo puts his pencil back in his backpack and turns back to the door. Techno glances up at him. "Tommy wants to know if you want to stay for dinner," he says, waving the phone, and Ranboo starts to say yes, then pauses.

He honestly *could* use some time to himself. While he would normally say yes right away, because dinner at Tommy's is always pretty fun-Phil lets them take the food to the gaming room, and then he and Tommy get to play Mario Kart while eating in between races-

Ranboo's had a pretty exhausting day.

"I don't think I can," he says. "Maybe tomorrow?"

Techno just shrugs and walks back down the hall. Ranboo sees himself out. He'll just talk to Tommy tomorrow. He can't exactly tell him about what Tubbo's taken on as a side gig, but he'll still apologize for not staying. He just needs some time.

Just a little bit of space, that's all.

Gotta love complicated identity dynamics! So Techno knows that Tommy's Spider-Man and that Tubbo is Hive, Tubbo's working with Tommy without *knowing* it's Tommy and thinking that Tommy's the one who gave him the job, Ranboo knows that Tubbo's working with Spider-Man, doesn't know who Spider-Man is, and thinks that Tommy doesn't know that Tubbo's working with Spider-Man, and everyone else has no idea that this is going on. Absolutely brilliant.

It's a tangled web of lies you're weaving there, Tommy.

heart-to-heart

Chapter 18: heart-to-heart

Wilbur and Tommy go bowling.

Crimeboys moment? Crimeboys moment! :D

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

“Tommy, you’re gonna burn yourself. Stop tryin’ to touch the grill,” Techno chastises, and Kristin sighs. Tommy pouts. He’s not *trying* to touch the grill, he’s telling Kristin about his *day*, because she *asked*, and he just so happens to be gesturing a little enthusiastically, that’s all. “I think the burgers are good. Do I flip them now?”

Kristin glances over, humming thoughtfully. “Yeah, that should be good. Give this side a little less time, though,” she says, and Techno flips the burgers, and Tommy’s stomach is rumbling. God, this is one of the best ideas Techno’s ever had. Not that Tommy would ever tell him that. Kristin turns back to him, and Tommy beams. “Go ahead, Toms, I’m listening.”

“So *then* I’m telling Ranboo that he should just come over, but then he’s all, ‘*Meh, meh, meh, but Puffy’s finally giving me a job interview*’ and I say to him, I say-I go, ‘Ranboo. What is more important to you? Our friendship, or money?’ And Ranboo looks me in the eyes, Kristin, he looks me *right* in the eyes,” Tommy says, and Kristin nods eagerly. “He dead-on just goes, ‘Money.’ And I just fuckin’ *lose* it, man, I’m just-!”

Tommy breaks off into barely-stifled laughter, and Kristin chuckles, ruffling his hair as she glances over at the burgers. Techno's pressing them gently against the grill with his griddle spatula, and Tommy stifles more laughter at the way the frilly apron looks on him. "I'd say money too if I were him," Techno says easily, poking at one of the burgers.

Kristin tuts and shakes her head, but she's still smiling. "No he wouldn't," she murmurs to Tommy, and he snorts. "Right, so, Tech, lower the temperature a bit. Yeah, there you go, now just let 'em sit." Techno nods, backing away slightly. Tommy leans a bit closer, and he sighs contentedly at the smell; he can't *wait* for these burgers. Kristin nudges his shoulder, and Tommy reluctantly steps back.

Techno snorts. "It's like watching a cat near a stove," he says, wiping his hands lightly on his apron.

"Oh, fuck off," Tommy huffs, though he *had* been very tempted to just grab one of the burgers right then. Techno raises a brow at him, and Tommy flips him off. "Kristin, I am being continuously bullied and am having a terrible day. I need to watch *Up* in order to feel better."

"We just watched it last weekend, bud," Kristin says, and Tommy pouts. He has more than earned the pick of the movie tonight; he's solved so many crimes this week! Of course, Kristin doesn't know that, so it's an understandable-albeit regrettable-point of view. "Besides, it's Wilbur's week."

Both Techno and Tommy groan at that. "Fuck, his picks are the worst," Tommy whines, and Techno nods in agreement. Tommy kicks at the ground. "He always picks something 'artistic' with a shitload of subtitles."

Techno tilts his head. "Well, we keep the subtitles on for regular movies too," he points out, and Tommy gives him a flat look.

"Yes, but I don't have to actively read those, which means I can check my phone for two seconds without being completely lost when I look back up," he says. Kristin gives his shoulder a sympathetic pat. "Plus, the artsy bullshit is basically indecipherable anyway, the

subtitles just make the confusion *more* frustrating.”

Kristin just shrugs. “I don’t know, I think his picks are nice,” she says. Then she frowns in thought, brows furrowed. “Well, I didn’t really get that Swedish film he picked, that one was just weird. Also, Tech, you can take the burgers off the grill now.”

He nods and starts to plate the burgers, and Tommy darts forward, snatching the first one off the plate. This immediately proves to be a bad decision, given that they’re still really fucking hot, and he drops it. Cursing under his breath, Tommy waves his hand frantically. Techno sighs and grabs his wrist to inspect the damage, which is annoying. Tommy can handle a little burn all on his own, thank you very much.

“Go inside and run it under cool water. *Do not* put ice on it. That will make it *worse*,” Techno emphasizes, and Tommy’s cheeks go red with embarrassment. *One* time. He mistreats his fire injuries *one time*, and he never gets to live it down, apparently.

Nevertheless, the pads of his fingers are still in pain, so Tommy heads into the kitchen, letting the cool water run over his hands. That’s actually much better. “Oh, hey,” Wilbur says from behind him, and Tommy jumps. Only a little, though. Wilbur snorts. “Chill out, I’m just in here to get some water. What, did you burn yourself?”

“None of your business, bitch,” Tommy informs him, and Wilbur rolls his eyes, patting the top of Tommy’s head as he grabs a water bottle from the fridge. Tommy clears his throat, and Wilbur nods in acknowledgement as he takes a swig from the bottle. “Right, so, um. Can I... Wil, can you lend me twenty pounds so I can go to the fundraiser next weekend?”

He figures it can’t hurt to attend. Since Tubbo’s going to be there, Tommy’s not going to have a guy in the chair to lean on, and while, yeah, he *can* patrol that night on his own, he kind of wants a night off from his usual superhero bullshit. Plus, he’ll get to use Wilbur’s uniform for blackmail material, which is an *excellent* bonus.

Wilbur blinks at him. “What the fuck? No,” he scoffs, and Tommy groans. “Where the hell has all your allowance gone? Have Kristin

and Phil finally caught on to your little schemes?”

“No, I haven’t got money because I...” Tommy trails off. What can he even say here? He can’t exactly tell Wilbur that he’s spent most of his money on bandages, food, and some supplies for Tubbo. He sighs and turns his attention back to the sink, scowling. “Forget it, I’ll just ask Techno or something.”

The water bottle crinkles a little; it’d be barely perceptible if it weren’t for Tommy’s enhanced hearing. “No, no, I can—I’ll give you the twenty,” Wilbur says quickly, and Tommy looks back up at him to see him fumbling for his wallet. That’s... weird. Wilbur puts a twenty pound note on the counter next to the sink. “There you go.”

Tommy narrows his eyes. “No strings attached?” he asks, and Wilbur shakes his head. This is all suspiciously nice. Wilbur hasn’t even told him he’s not allowed to make fun of whatever stupid outfit Big Q’s making the teacher volunteers wear. Wilbur looks weirdly nervous, though, so Tommy just softens his demeanor and smiles. “Thanks, Wil.”

“Of course,” he says easily, and he ruffles Tommy’s hair again. Wilbur takes another sip from his water bottle and coughs awkwardly. Tommy’s burns are feeling much better now, so he turns the tap off and dries his hands on the little dishtowel hanging from the cupboard below the sink. Wilbur runs a hand through his hair. “So, uh. What movie do you want to watch tonight?”

“The fuck are you asking *me* for? It’s your week, big man,” Tommy says, smoothing down his shirt and turning to leave. Something feels off, though. He turns back around. “Wait, are you offering to give me your pick? What’re you on about?”

Wilbur just shrugs. “I may or may not need you to cancel whatever plans you have for tomorrow to come bowling with me and my friends,” he says, faux-nonchalantly, and Tommy huffs. There it is. This makes much more sense now. He turns to leave again, and Wilbur groans, tagging along with him. “*Please*, Tommy! I need someone to be a buffer between me and Sally, *and* all my friends love you!”

"I'm not playing wingman. And you don't have friends, your *coworkers* love me. I'm a pleasure to have in class," Tommy says, nose upturned as he leads the two of them into the backyard. Techno presents him with a plate full of burgers, and Tommy pumps a fist in the air. He bites into one of the burgers and his body slumps in relief; ah, sweet sustenance. "This is why Techno's my favorite brother."

Scoffing in disbelief, Wilbur smacks him upside the head. "Fuck off, you're only saying that 'cuz he's given you food," he says, and Tommy gives Wilbur his best shit-eating grin before properly digging into the burgers. Wilbur snorts. "Christ, you really *do* eat like a raccoon. Anyways, come with me tomorrow and I'll teach you how to drive."

"No you will *not*," Kristin says, eyes wide. Tommy frowns at her; he's going to be such a great driver, he's already stopped, like, three carjackings semi-successfully. "You *just* bought that car, Wil."

"I'm not going to crash his fuckin' car, Kristin," Tommy huffs, and Kristin eyes him warily. She turns to Wilbur and gives him a firm Mum Glare, and he wilts. Alright, so no driving lessons for Tommy, then. "Right, if you don't have anything else to offer me, I will be spending tomorrow night in my room, playing PC games with Henry."

"Who's Henry?" Phil asks as he, too, enters the yard, and Tommy grumbles a few swears as he steals one of Tommy's burgers.

Kristin points her finger at Tommy and twirls it in a circle. "Is that what you named your potted plant, or am I misremembering?" she asks, and Tommy stares flatly. This family is incapable of retaining information, as it seems.

"It's what he calls that stuffed cow he's had since he was a baby," Wilbur answers for him, and Tommy nods, taking a bite out of his second burger. Wilbur tilts his water bottle in Tommy's direction, eyes narrowed. "If I promise to buy you as many arcade games at the bowling alley as you want, will you come along?"

Techno snorts. "You're gonna go broke if *that's* what you're offerin',"

he says, and he gives Tommy a meaningful look, probably trying to convey the importance of brotherly bonds and the beauty of family or some shit. More than likely, he's fed up with the arguing. "Tommy. Go bowling with Wilbur and his borin' friends."

Squawking in offense, Wilbur shoves at Techno. "My friends are *not* boring!" he says.

"I bet they don't still live at home, though," Phil jokes, and Tommy lifts the plate of burgers to his face to hide his laughter.

"Don't say that," Kristin chastises, playfully swatting at Phil's stupid hat. "Even if it *is* kind of true."

"Oi! Whose side are you even *on*?!" Wilbur demands. "I'll have you know, plenty of them still do!"

Phil raises a brow. "Plenty of them? Do they all go to another school as well, like the girlfriend you made up in your last year of primary school?" he asks, and Kristin shakes her head fondly.

Techno just sips his beer and slides Tommy a can of Coke. "Gotta love a family barbeque," he mutters, and Tommy clinks the side of his can against Techno's bottle.

"Cheers to that."

Bowling with his brother's friends is *not* Tommy's ideal Saturday night, unsurprisingly.

"*Tommy!*" most of them cheer as the two of them approach, rented shoes in hand, and Tommy gives the group a wave. He's slightly taken aback at Eret, Karl, and Charlie being some of the newer faces in the group, but they're a welcome addition.

Niki claps him on the shoulder, and Tommy beams at her. "Glad to see he could drag you along," she says, sticking her tongue out at Wilbur, who rolls his eyes as Niki brings Tommy to the middle of the group. "Okay, somebody has to make sure the bumpers are up for him."

Tommy glares at her, then points threateningly at Sam, who's already starting to add him to the list of players. "Don't you fuckin' *dare*, Sam," he says, and Sam blinks innocently at him as he taps a button, presumably to comply with the bit. Tommy shakes his head. "Assholes. All of you are assholes."

"Yeah, yeah, love you too, now hurry up and pick a ball out," Niki says, and Tommy mocks her as soon as her back is turned, but he's promptly flipped off. She's not even looking at him. Damn.

He turns to the bowling balls on display, and Wilbur points out a neon yellow one reading 0.5. Tommy rolls his eyes. He'll take the heaviest bowling ball they've got; that'll show them, and then that way he can convince them to take the bumpers down. Because Tommy doesn't need the kiddie bumpers, he's great at this.

As he's effortlessly carrying the heaviest one-a ten kilo-back to the group, Charlie waves. "Hi, Tommy! Hi, Wilbur from eight-oh-two!" he chirps, and Tommy nods. This guy's still weird; The Sense seems to be relatively fine with him, but... still. Charlie offers his arm, and Tommy shifts the ball to one hand. "Dap me up!"

He does. Charlie's enthusiasm is kind of funny. The others, including Wilbur, are all staring at him, and Tommy tosses the ball up and down. "Kind of light for a bowling ball," he says, and Sally grins, wrapping an arm around his shoulders.

She looks rather pretty with her pink floral dress and her dark red braids up in a ponytail. Wilbur's probably losing it right now. "That's my future rugby star right there," she says proudly, and Tommy grins. Niki shakes her head. Sally glances over at Wilbur, who immediately goes a bit red in the face; Tommy resists the urge to scoff. "Pink's my favorite color, Wil, you picked a good ball."

"O-Oh, did-if you wanted the pink one, that's fine, I can-here!" Wilbur says, and Eret shakes their head. Tommy catches their eye and inclines his head. Tell him about it. Sally takes the ball and smiles gently at Wilbur, her arm falling away from Tommy's shoulder as she moves to stand next to Sam by the little screen.

"You should put me in as Big Man Tommy," Tommy says, and Niki

nudges Sam, leaning down to whisper something to him. Tommy narrows his eyes, then turns his attention to the scoreboard, which reads *Niki, Eret, Sam, Sal, Charlie, Karl, Wimblur*. A new name pings underneath Wilbur's, and Tommy shouts in alarm. "Fucking '*Child?!*' Are you kidding me?!"

Eret chuckles. "At least it's accurate," they say, and Tommy thinks they have a lot of nerve for someone who's only *just* joining Wilbur's circle of friends. Eret turns to Niki, shooting her a thumbs-up. "Nice pick, Niki."

"Why thank you," she says, doing a mock-bow, and Tommy scowls at her. She shrugs and grabs her ball—a similar pink to Sally's that reads a slightly smaller number. "You suggested something for yourself. Now you have to have a stupid nickname."

"Those *are* the rules," Sally says, and Tommy shakes his head. "Right, Niki, you're up first! You got this!"

Niki smiles brightly and moves up to the lane, and Tommy sits down on the nearest chair to switch out his shoes. To his surprise, someone sits next to him, and he looks up to see Karl, who is evidently trying to pretend as though he hasn't noticed he's sat next to Tommy. To his credit, it would almost be convincing if it weren't for the occasional glance that Tommy catches in his peripheral vision.

"Hello, Mr. Jacobs," Tommy says as he laces up his left shoe, and Karl clears his throat, smiling and waving lightly. Tommy looks over to Niki, who's just gotten six of the pins down—a split, but she's a great bowler. He's not worried. Tommy's not entirely sure what to say to Karl, whose hands keep clenching and unclenching on his knees. "Um. It's nice to see you...?"

"Oh, it's—! It's nice to see you too, Tommy," Karl says, and Tommy's not sure if it's just the weird bowling alley lighting, but Karl seems a little... nervous. Karl swallows and looks out towards Eret, who's up now, so Tommy shrugs it off. "So, who do you think is gonna win?"

Tommy huffs out a laugh. "Me, obviously," he says, narrowing his eyes when Sam looks in their direction. Sam shakes his head fondly

and steps up to the lane with his dark green ball as Eret moves to sit back down, having gotten a strike. Tommy looks back to Karl and shrugs. "Honestly, I dunno. Could be anyone's game. Well, anyone but Wilbur, mans can't bowl for shit."

Karl laughs, which means that he's probably cool. There have been friends of Wilbur's from the faculty that haven't really liked him or Techno, and Wilbur had stopped hanging out with them pretty quickly. "I kind of suck at it too, if I'm being honest," he says easily, and Tommy chuckles, turning his ball over in his hands. Karl's brow furrows. "Can I ask why you picked the heaviest ball?"

Sam comes away with four pins total, and Sally steps up. "I like a challenge," Tommy answers simply, and Karl's smile seems weirdly disappointed. Is Big Q's new staff full of fucking weirdos that don't know how to have a normal conversation or some shit? "Anyways, uh. Did Niki invite you?"

"Charlie did, actually," Karl says, sticking his hands in his hoodie pocket, and Tommy leans back in the chair. Sally's gotten a spare. Good for her. "He got invited by Sam and didn't want to come alone, so... I'm here. His first pick was Quackity, actually, but he was busy. Said something about having to run his club tonight."

"Wh-Big Q's got a club?" Tommy asks, brows furrowed, and Karl nods, seemingly confused at Tommy's confusion.

He hums. "Yeah, it's called Las Nevadas, it's only *kinda* far from the school," he says with a shrug, and Tommy hums. He's passed by that place a couple of times on patrol; no bouncer has let him in, though, with or without the mask. "How else would we be able to afford a carnival for a fundraiser, man? You really think the board would've given us enough funds?"

Tommy laughs at that; yeah, no, he honestly should've seen something like this coming. "Geez, Big Q's really trying to make things better around here, huh?" he hums, and Karl nods. Charlie's still struggling with the ball, and Tommy stands, grabbing one of the lighter balls and tapping Charlie on the shoulder. "Here, this'll be better-holy *shit*, why are you using the same kind of ball as me?! That shit's heavy, man!"

"I figured it would be fine since you had it," Charlie says, switching out for the lighter one, and he hefts it in the air a couple of times. "Oh, this one's *much* better. Thank you, Tommy!"

"No problem, man," Tommy says easily, on his way to sit back down next to Karl when Eret and Niki call him over. He heads over to them and sits next to Niki. "Ow do?"

"Eret and I are taking bets on who's actually gonna take the game. You want in?" Niki asks, and Tommy sighs. He's got no money on him. Niki rolls her eyes. "Not with money, with, like, food or favors, stuff like that!"

Eret hums. "Yeah, I'm wagering a day where I'll give whoever wins free rides to wherever they want *and* an ice cream cake," they say, and while Tommy would've been enticed by that a few months ago, his sweet tooth has been evicted to make room for whatever the fuck his appetite's become. "Niki's betting a free tray of whatever baked goods whoever wins wants."

Frowning thoughtfully, Tommy nods. "Alright, I'm in. I'll bet you one store trip where I carry all your bags that you're going to win, Niki," he says, and she positively lights up. "And, when you win, I'll expect my food to be delivered to me on a silver platter."

Niki taps at her phone, then gives the two of them a firm nod. "Right! So, that's Sam betting on Wilbur, Eret betting on you, me betting on Sally, and you betting on me," she lists out, and Tommy snorts. Sam's definitely going to lose.

A few chairs away, Wilbur scowls at them. "Are you involving my baby brother in your filthy gambling again?" he asks, and Niki gives him an innocent grin.

"*Our* baby brother. Collectively," she says. Wilbur shakes his head and goes back to what's probably his best attempt at having a conversation with Sally.

"Ah yes, communism," Tommy says, nodding wisely, and Niki and Eret burst out laughing.

Karl steps up to the lane and his ball rolls right into the gutter. Tommy stifles a laugh. Niki chuckles and turns to Eret, chin perched on her hand. "So, how's the new job treating you? Or are you still not allowed to disclose anything yet?" she teases, and Eret rolls their eyes.

"I'm prevented from telling anyone about our research projects because of my NDA, I'm allowed to tell you that it's going well and I'm having a lovely time," Eret says, and Tommy watches Karl knock over two of the pins on his second try.

Now Tommy's up, and he's gotta be careful. He can't bowl *too* forcefully; he might break the fucking pins or something. He can't be too good at the game either, he doesn't want to lose the bet. So Tommy aims for the very corner and rolls the ball down the lane, hiding his grin when it knocks down eight of them. That's pretty decent, *and* he's gotten a split, so he'll only be able to get nine of them.

This is actually pretty fun.

In the end, it's Charlie who wins, with an almost perfect game, meaning none of them have won the bet.

It kind of sucks-Niki had gotten second place which means Tommy would've gotten all that good shit had Charlie not won. But hey, Charlie had seemed pretty happy about the whole thing, so Tommy's got no beef with the results.

He and Wilbur say their goodbyes, and Sam presses an ice cream cone into Tommy's hands anyway, and they pile into the car, Tommy somewhat enjoying the plain vanilla in spite of all the sugar. Wilbur starts to pull out of the parking lot, and Tommy glances out the window, watching the bowling alley get further and further away in the side mirror.

"So... did you have a nice time?" Wilbur asks, and Tommy nods, taking a huge bite of the ice cream, and Wilbur makes a face. "Don't fucking chomp your ice cream, what the hell is wrong with you?"

Doesn't it fuck with your front teeth?"

"Nah, it's all go-AH! Brainfreeze, fuck, *fuck!*" Tommy says, clutching the front of his head, and Wilbur laughs as he turns onto a main road. The brainfreeze fizzles out, and Tommy glances over at the side of Wilbur's face. "Thanks. For taking me with you. That was less stupid than I thought it'd be."

Wilbur smiles gently. "Yeah, man, no problem," he says easily, and Tommy fiddles with his seatbelt as he nibbles at the waffle cone. He doesn't really know what else to talk to Wilbur about. Not that just sitting here and enjoying Wilbur's company isn't fine, but Tommy's too restless to just sit in silence. Thankfully, Wilbur seems to pick up on that. "Tommy, have you actually talked to Puffy about your panic attacks like you said you would?"

Dammit! Normal conversation is once again foiled by Spider-Man bullshit. Tommy huffs. "I'm not having *panic attacks*, Wil. I just had an off-day, and yes, I did speak to Puffy," he says, and that's not *technically* a lie. Puffy had called Tubbo the other day at lunch, and Tommy had said hi to her. Wilbur's not buying it, though. "I'm serious, man, I'm not having panic attacks. It's not that bad, and it goes away in, like, a couple minutes."

"Alright, well, sue me for caring, I guess," Wilbur mutters, and Tommy feels that's a little unfair, considering he's had a decent week other than that one day. He scowls, and Wilbur groans, turning down another street. "I'm just saying, hyperventilating and almost crying over one grade isn't a *normal* reaction, Tommy, and smashing your Coke can to bits isn't normal either. Karl told me how shaken up you were at lunch, man, I'm not stupid."

"It was *one* day! I'm telling you, Wil, I'm fine! I get that you're worried, alright, I do, but I've already talked to Techno about what's going on, he's helping me out!" Tommy says, and that's technically true. He hasn't told Techno about his... lingering tension from Spider-Man's patrols, but he's fine! And Techno's looking out for him!

Wilbur scoffs. "Yeah, fuckin' *Techno*, of *course* you told Techno," he says, and Tommy makes a face again.

"The fuck is *that* supposed to mean?!" he demands, and Wilbur just shakes his head. "No, fuck off with that, Wil, what the hell are you talking about?!"

"I just think it's a little weird that all of a sudden, you and Techno are just-the *best* of friends now or some shit. You barely even spoke to each other when you didn't have to a few months ago!" Wilbur says, and Tommy thinks that's a bit unfair as well. He and Techno are still *brothers*, they might not have been that close before this, but they didn't have some weird vow of silence. "Which is why it's fucking weird that you're apparently telling him *all* about what's going on with you, and you haven't said *shit* to me, because you've always told me *everything*, and I have no idea what I've done wrong!"

Wilbur's knuckles are white around the steering wheel, and Tommy's shoulders drop. "Wilby, I'm not... the reason I'm not telling you stuff isn't because I'm pissed," he says, and Wilbur just shakes his head, still focused on the road as he turns onto their street. "I'm serious. I... I *am* sorry that I haven't been talking to you about this, but... Wilbur, who I talk to and who I confide in isn't a slight on how much I trust you, you know that."

"What else am I supposed to think when you're borderline avoiding me?" Wilbur asks, sounding tired as he pulls into the driveway. "Toms, I don't know what you're going through, but I *do* know that it's clearly hurting you, and the fact that you keep insisting nothing's wrong, that you're fine, it's... it's *worrying*."

He goes to open the driver's side door, but Tommy stops him, a hand on his arm. "Wil, I... I'm not... I *am* fine. You don't have to worry about me, alright? I'm handling it," he says, and Wilbur stares sadly at him. "I swear it on Henry. Nothing's going on that you don't already know about."

Okay, well, *that's* a bold-faced lie, but Wilbur doesn't have to know about that.

"If there *is* something going on, just tell me if there is, and then tell me whether or not you want to talk to me about it. I don't like assuming that I've somehow pissed you off to the point where you won't fucking speak to me," Wilbur says, and Tommy nods. After

another moment of the two of them sitting in silence, Wilbur pulls him in for a very awkward over-the-console hug, and Tommy chuckles. “I don’t feel like arguing with you anymore, so stop doing stupid shit and I’ll stop doing stupid shit too, alright?”

“You got it, big man,” Tommy says, closing his eyes in contentment even though the console between them is digging into his side. “I’ve missed you, Wil.”

“I missed you too, Toms.”

Fellas, I am *so* excited about the next few chapters that are coming up. I hope you liked this chapter, and I always look forward to any feedback/theories you've got! :D

spectrophobia

Chapter 19: spectrophobia

Techno's decided it's time for Tommy to learn how to throw a punch, and clingyduo reconnects.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

There is a strange man in Tommy's home.

Well, not a *complete* stranger, he's met Dream before, of course, but that doesn't make the fucker any less strange.

He's sitting at the dining room table with Phil, some kind of blueprint laid out in front of the two of them, and Tommy blinks, water bottle in hand. "Uh, afternoon, fellas," he says, and Phil gives him a smile. He can't tell what the fuck Dream's expression is. That stupid mask is really annoying. "Right, well, I'll get out of your hair, then—"

"No, no, please, sit down," Dream says, gesturing to the chair across from him, and The Sense yells in the back of his mind that he should fuck off and do the exact opposite. But Tommy doesn't want to be rude, not in front of a very important client of Phil's, so he sits down. The Sense is probably annoyed at him. "It's great to see you again, Tommy. Your dad was just telling me how much better you've been doing in school with your brother's tutoring."

"We're all very proud of you, Toms," Phil says, idly circling something on the blueprint, and Tommy nods, though his smile feels more like a grimace. "Right, so, Dream, did you want to have this room over by the left? Because I'm not really sure if that would be—"

"You should do what you think is best, Phil, I have full faith in your

expertise,” Dream says, eyes not leaving Tommy’s face, and while Tommy is immensely uncomfortable, he *is* a little miffed at how dismissive Dream’s being. “How’s your day been, Tommy?”

Tommy blinks. “Um. It was... good,” he says, and Dream’s eyes crinkle in the corners. The Sense sends a shiver down his spine, and Tommy does his best to suppress that. Tommy turns to Phil, who glances up from the blueprints, glasses perched on the end of his nose. “I’m gonna study with Techno for a bit and then head over to Tubbo’s. Is that okay, or do we have plans?”

Phil nods. “You’re good, just be back before it gets too dark out. I don’t want you walking alone, even with a superhero patrolling the streets,” he jokes, and Tommy chuckles. Dream looks down at the blueprints and then up at Phil. Phil twirls his pencil idly in his hand. “If you’re giving the go-ahead for the underground portion of the facility, we’ll have to talk about air conditioning and ventilation units, y’know.”

“Money’s not an object,” Dream says, and he turns back to Tommy. Ah, shit, he should really get up to Techno’s room before this gets any *more* unbearable. “You know, I’m specialized in biological research and development and the head of my department. If you ever need supplies or information for a project, I can help you out.”

“Good to know,” Tommy says, tilting his water bottle towards Dream in appreciation. That actually might be pretty helpful; he could probably get some stuff for Tubbo to use for gadgets that way. “Anyways, Dadza, if you need me, I’ll be-”

“Before you go,” Dream interrupts, and Tommy holds back a groan, “what do you think of the plans so far? We could probably use a pair of fresh eyes, we’ve been staring at this thing for the past few hours.”

Well, it can’t hurt, can it? Tommy looks over it, and his first impression is that he’s just looking at a whole bunch of shapes. “What am I looking at, exactly?” he asks, and Phil chuckles, shaking his head. Tommy squints, and he can *kind* of understand what the floor plan is. “Oh, nevermind, I think I got it now.”

It looks pretty cool, honestly; the offices are big and the basement's got a bunch of rooms that Tommy is pretty sure are supposed to be labs, and the sketch of the building itself looks like a really cool and modern layout. "You like it?" Phil asks, and Tommy nods. Phil claps his hands and grins, and Tommy rolls his eyes. "We've got the Tommy seal of approval, Dream."

"Great," Dream says, and Tommy edges towards the doorway. Hopefully they'll finally fucking let him leave. Phil turns his attention back to the blueprints, but Dream's still *watching* him. It's uncomfortable. The Sense is losing its shit. "You're a good kid, Tommy. Thanks."

Tommy gives him an awkward thumbs-up. "No problem, big man," he says, and he high-tails it out of the dining room before Dream can drag him back into more conversation. Tommy heads upstairs and knocks on Techno's door-because the last time he hadn't, Techno had hung him upside-down out of the window by his ankles-and grins when Techno opens it. "Hello, brother dearest, I am here for my tutoring."

Sighing, Techno lets him in, and Tommy flops down on the bed next to a newly-polished scabbard. "Don't touch that," Techno says, and Tommy grabs it, sticking his tongue out at Techno as he swings the scabbard in his direction. "You're a moron and you're gonna slice your hand off. Put it down."

"Fine, but you're no fun," Tommy says. He grins and tosses the scabbard in the air, webbing it to the ceiling before Techno can catch it.

"I hate you," Techno tells him flatly, and Tommy flips him off. He whacks Tommy's shoulder lightly. "Get up. We're not doing schoolwork today, your grades are good enough that I'm not worried about them for now."

Tommy sits up, incredibly intrigued. Techno moves to the door, then jerks his head for Tommy to follow. He does, and Techno leads him down to the backyard, where a small punching bag and a few assorted pieces of gym equipment have been set up. Tommy's eyes light up, and he turns to Techno, who raises a brow at him. "Are you

teaching me how to fight?!" Tommy asks, and Techno grins.

He picks up the hand pads from the ground and stands before Tommy, clapping them together with that same easy grin. "I figured, if you're gonna do your heroics while you're out of the suit, it can't hurt to have you learn to throw a punch properly," Techno says, and Tommy goes a little bit red with embarrassment. Techno sees it, of course, and he snorts. "I'm serious, kid, it's almost painful to watch you fight those guys when your form is so off."

Tommy huffs, smiling despite his annoyance. "Alright, asshole, how do *you* think I should be fighting?" he asks, and Techno's amusement shifts to focus. Oh, hell yeah, Techno's actually serious about this! Shit, wait, he should probably address the superstrength thing. "Right, I should warn you, even when I'm holding back, the punches can be... kind of a lot."

Scoffing softly, Techno nods. "Show me what you've got right now, we'll work on form from there," he says, and Tommy hesitates. How hard *should* he punch? Techno will probably get annoyed if he thinks Tommy's purposely holding back more than is strictly necessary, but Tommy's not about to punch his brother as hard as he punches criminals. "Tommy. C'mon."

Well, Techno's asked for it.

Tommy takes a swing-most of his focus is on holding back-and his fist comes into contact with the hand pad. Techno only stumbles back a bit, which is good. "See? I can punch just fine, big man," he says, and Techno narrows his eyes. "The fuck is *that* face for, man, I'm-I! God, you're a shit teacher, Techno, y'know that?"

"Punch me like you normally punch. I can't work around your usual fightin' strength and style unless I *see it*," Techno emphasizes, and Tommy grimaces. "I can handle myself, Tommy, you're not gonna hurt me."

"But I *could*, though," Tommy says, and Techno sighs. He starts to take the hand pads off, and Tommy smacks his arms. "No! No, I'll do it, I'll punch for real, fuck you, I wanna learn!"

Nodding, Techno readjusts the hand pads and gets back into his goofy-looking defensive stance, his shoulders squared. "Good. Now pretend I'm a criminal and punch me," he says, and Tommy takes a deep breath, trying not to tense up as he throws a punch at Techno's left hand pad.

Techno topples to the ground arm-first. Shit.

Tommy winces and offers a hand to help him up. "Christ, Tommy, what the hell are we *feedin'* you?" Techno asks, slightly winded, and Tommy chuckles.

"Radioactive spider superpowers, evidently," he says, and Techno lets out a huff of a laugh, rolling his left shoulder and squeezing the muscle there. Tommy gives him an apologetic grin. "I mean, you *did* say to hit you hard. At least now you know why criminals go down so easy."

Techno laughs again, and he readjusts the straps of the hand pads. "I *did* say that," he agrees, and Tommy wonders if he's accidentally fucked up Techno's arm. Techno gets back into position, and Tommy squints. This... is a very stupid thing for Techno to be doing. "Listen, I *am* gonna tell you to hold back a little more until we perfect your form, but I'm not ditchin' you."

Well, that's somewhat of a relief. Tommy grins and cracks his knuckles, getting into his usual fighting stance. Techno starts to correct the way he's standing already, and Tommy listens, because Techno knows what the fuck he's talking about.

This is gonna be so great.

Tommy is losing very badly.

"This fucking banana peel is yours *again*, Tubbo?! Are you kidding me?!" he screeches, veering his kart to the right, and Tubbo grins wickedly. Okay, so Tommy's a little bit rusty; so sue him, he hasn't had a chance to sit down and hone his Mario Kart skills as of recently. Tubbo inches ever-closer to the finish line, and Tommy

narrows his eyes. "Oh, fuck you, I'm gonna kick your ass, I swear, Tubbo-"

"You can't kick my ass from eighth place," Tubbo taunts, throwing his arms up as Toad crosses the finish line, and Tommy swears under his breath, trying *very* hard to pass the AI in front of him. Tubbo leans back, bastard that he is, and he pokes at Tommy's sides; Tommy squirms, then jumps, and he scoots away from Tubbo's hands, groaning in frustration as he gets passed yet again. Now he's in ninth. "Wow, bossman, you're shit at this."

Tommy grumbles a few more swears, finally passing the two people in front of him and finishing in seventh. "Don't you even start, Tubbo, you got lucky, you fuckin' prick," Tommy says, and Tubbo grins as he flips Tommy off. "So... how are you liking working with Spider-Man, Big T?"

Practically lighting up, Tubbo leans back against his bed. "It's a fucking *dream*, Tommy, you've got no idea! Seriously, it's so incredible," he says, and Tommy grins. He's really glad that Tubbo's enjoying himself. And, honestly, his help is needed. Eyes wide, Tubbo grabs his shoulders and shakes him slightly. "Dude, I helped him keep a *building* up!"

"Did you really?" Tommy asks, feigning shock, and Tubbo nods eagerly, dashing over to his desk and pulling up the footage. He has to hold back his laughter; Tubbo's so excited to show him, and Tommy had lived through it. Tommy tries his best to be believably reactionary as the video plays, and it's surreal to watch his own perspective all over again.

When his hands start to get shaky, he takes a few deep breaths as discreetly as possible. Tubbo's practically bouncing out of his seat, and Tommy's not about to be the cause of that diminishing for him. "Isn't that cool?! And Spider-Man saved all those people! He's so fucking strong, and he's super down-to-earth, so much funnier in person than when reporters interview him," Tubbo says, and Tommy is *so* tempted to rub the fact that Tubbo had openly called him funny in his face, but he refrains, because Tubbo's safety is more important than his own ego.

Tommy nudges Tubbo's side and beams at him. "Glad I could make it happen for you, Big T," he says, and Tubbo punches his shoulder playfully. Tommy stretches above his head and lets out a sigh. "Right, well, what d'you wanna do now? I've got 'til, like, eight at the latest."

Rubbing his hands together, Tubbo grins in that scary way that only Tubbo can, and Tommy smiles nervously. "Actually... wanna help me test out a gadget for Spider-Man?" he says, and *oh*, does Tommy want to say no. But he nods eagerly, because it would be entirely unrealistic for him, as Tommy, to *not* want to help his best friend with things meant for a superhero.

This might even be beneficial for Tubbo; he can test out whatever it is *on* Spider-Man, even if he doesn't know it. So Tommy leans against the desk, arms crossed, as Tubbo roots through his closet for something. "What're we testing out, here?" Tommy asks as Tubbo tosses miscellaneous gadgets and gizmos behind him, a few *clinks* and *clanks* coming from within the depths of the closet. Tommy's brows furrow. "If I grow an extra limb, I'm suing you."

"You're not gonna grow an extra limb, bozo," Tubbo says, and Tommy barks out a laugh at the use of the word 'bozo,' and Tubbo's cheeks are pink with embarrassment as he fiddles with something white and large. "Fuck off, Ranboo made me watch one of those John Mulaney specials the other day, the 'bozo' bit's still stuck in my head."

Tommy eyes the thing in Tubbo's hands warily. "What exactly are you making me use?" he asks, and Tubbo tuts, rolling his eyes as he starts to strap something onto Tommy's face. "Wh-! Warn a guy before you start shoving something on his face, Tubbo, Christ-"

"Shut the fuck up and wear the gas mask, stop being a baby-hah!" Tubbo says as he struggles against Tommy, and Tommy gives in after another moment or two, letting Tubbo adjust the matte white straps against his head. He feels like a muzzled dog. Tubbo puts his hands on his hips triumphantly and holds up a little vial. Tommy's eyes go wide. "Now all I have to do is test out the spores-you might pass out, we'll see-and then you can be done."

"You're gonna blow *spores* at me?! What the fuck?!" Tommy squawks, and Tubbo waves dismissively, though Tommy thinks he's having a very reasonable reaction. Honestly, he hasn't gotten a good look at the mask itself, but it looks *scarily* similar to the expensive kind you'd get at a costume shop, only it's white with what appears to be, from what Tommy can see, a little spiderweb-like shape on one of the cheeks. "Well, it's on theme, at least."

Tubbo grins and pinches his nose shut, taking a massive gulp of air before picking up the fan off of his desk, opening up the top of the vial, and blowing a very small cloud of green into Tommy's face. Tommy makes a face under the mask, and as Tubbo goes about waving the fan throughout the room and opening the window to air it out, he looks a little blue in the face.

He takes a big gasp of air again, and Tommy stifles a laugh as he doubles over. "Christ, I should make two of those for testing purposes," Tubbo says, sounding winded, and Tommy pats his back sympathetically. Perking up, Tubbo starts to turn Tommy's face back and forth as he inspects his handiwork. "So it worked! You're not passing out, which is great, that means it's worked, that's great! Then again, Spider-Man had a delayed reaction to the stuff when the bank heist had happened, maybe we should wait a bit just in case, I'm not *entirely* certain how the spores work, maybe they differ person to person-oh! I'm rambling. My bad, bossman."

Tommy chuckles and starts to take the mask off. He doesn't mind Tubbo's science rambling; he welcomes it, even. The less time he spends alone with his thoughts, the better. "Nah, you're good. I'm glad the mask works! Or, well, jury's still out, I guess, but... y'know," Tommy says with a shrug, and Tubbo grins.

Then he snaps his fingers like he's just realized something, and he brings out what Tommy recognizes as his old Spider-Man mask, and Tommy tries not to show his sudden nervousness. "I've duplicated the spores-it was pretty easy, honestly, 404 should get better lab techs-so we can try this out again, this time with you in another mask!" Tubbo says, and Tommy nods, slowly taking the mask and pulling it on.

There's no way Tubbo will recognize him like this, right? It's not as if

he's fully suited up, and if Tubbo hasn't recognized his voice in the suit yet, surely he won't if Tommy's just wearing the mask. "Right, well, if you blow spores in my face and I pass the fuck out and hit my head and die, I'm going to kill you," Tommy says, strapping the gas mask back on, and Tubbo snorts, grabbing another vial, presumably full of spores.

They repeat the process, and Tommy does not, in fact, pass the fuck out. Tubbo pumps his fists in the air, and Tommy grins despite himself. "It fuckin' worked! I am the best guy in the chair in the history of the world!" Tubbo cheers, and Tommy laughs softly as he pulls both masks off.

"I'm sure you are," Tommy says, and Tubbo makes a face at him. Tommy freezes up a little as there's a soft little rumble from the bottom of the stairs, then tenses as the footsteps approach the door. The Sense isn't warning him, so it's probably Puffy, and judging by Tubbo's face as *he* starts to hear the footsteps, it's *definitely* Puffy. So, like the ride-or-die best friend that he is, Tommy responds to the gentle knock on the door by opening it just enough that he can lean into the gap and be ninety-nine percent confident that he's covering up Tubbo's frantic tidying. "Oh, hello, Captain, we're having a lovely round of Mario Kart. Care to join us?"

She chuckles, shaking her head fondly. "I'm here to get the two of you downstairs to eat something," she says, and Tommy grins. Puffy pushes a lock of hair behind her ear and tilts her head in that Therapist Look. Tommy is immediately a hundred times warier. "How've you been, Tommy? I heard you were having a tough time a while ago."

"Oh, I've been-everything has been just *peachy*, Captain P, nothing to report," Tommy says, waving dismissively, and Puffy raises a brow at him. "Mhm. No Thera-Puffy needed, don't you worry! Normal Puffy mode is appropriate and acceptable for these circumstances, yes indeed."

Tubbo throws open the door fully then, his grin far too strained to be convincing, but Puffy gives him a warm smile anyway. "Hey! Aunt P! Sorry, I was just cleaning up some, uh, controllers. So, dinner?" Tubbo asks, and Puffy rolls her eyes, but she leads the two of them

downstairs anyway.

The smell is *exquisite*, and Tommy tries to hide his excitement; Puffy's made The Stew again! It is, quite possibly, the best meal in the world, and it's been Tommy's favorite since he was a little kid. He can vividly remember eating some on a cold winter day after he'd spent it with Tubbo, Foolish, and Wilbur, the four of them making snowmen and coming inside with red hands and red noses, to be greeted and fussed over by a very frazzled Puffy. Idly, Tommy notes that she'd been so very stressed back then. She's doing better now, looks healthier and happier than the living ghost of a woman he remembers from his childhood. It's a relief.

"I made your favorite!" Puffy says as the three of them get to the breakfast bar, two steaming bowls set in front of the barstools, and one on the counter under it. She gives Tubbo an apologetic smile, and Tommy immediately makes a beeline for his usual spot. "Sorry I haven't been around too much, Bee. I'm working on it, I promise."

It's not something Tommy's meant to overhear, but he does—enhanced hearing is a bitch sometimes. He glances over his shoulder at Tubbo, who gives Puffy an honest grin, then dashes for the seat next to Tommy, starting to scarf down the stew at a pace almost on par to Tommy's own. "Fanks, Puff-ee!" they say in unison, cheeks full of delicious, delicious sustenance. Puffy sighs and takes a few bites of her own stew.

"So, Toms, what time do you have to be home?" Puffy asks, and Tommy tries his hardest to mime the sun going down with only one hand. Puffy snorts, but she nods nonetheless, and Tommy smiles, cheeks puffed out. "Alright, so before it gets too dark, I'm assuming. You should take some stew home with you for Wil, I know he's a fan."

"I will take stew home, yes," Tommy says, with no intention of allowing Wilbur to indulge in this absolutely delightful food. Puffy crosses her arms, *knowingly*, and Tommy grumbles a few swears under his breath. "Alright, fine, I'll share some."

Tubbo pouts. "Don't let him take home too much, I want the leftovers as well," he protests, and Puffy chuckles, ruffling his hair. Tubbo

turns to Tommy, waving his spoon in his general direction. "By the way, am I seeing you at the carnival? You never told us whether or not you were gonna be there."

Nodding as he finishes off another bite of stew, Tommy hums. "Yeah! Wil gave me the twenty pounds for the entry fee, I'll be there. Is Ranboo coming too?" Tommy asks, and Tubbo grins as he nods. Smiling slightly, Tommy nudges Tubbo's shoulder. "Hey, that means the three of us are gonna be hangin' out that night, then!"

"Me and Foolish will be there too," Puffy chimes in, and Tommy grins. Foolish is coming back from the States! Fuck yeah! Puffy takes a bite of stew, then makes a little *mm!* sound like she's just remembered something. "That reminds me! Tubs, did you want to meet up there or have us drive you? I'm fine with either."

Tubbo glances over at Tommy, and he shrugs. He's willing to demand that his family drives Tubbo with them, and he's also cool with walking there together. "Um, I'll drive with you and Foolish," he decides, and Tommy shrugs. "I kinda miss him. Even if he *is* an idiot."

"Don't say that," Puffy chastises, and Tubbo gives her a toothy grin. She hums, a fond sort of sound, and she sets her stew to the side. "You know, this reminds me of when you two were little, like *really* little, maybe seven or eight, and you both came in missing the same tooth, and I gave you both stew because it was a really cold day."

"Oh yeah! I pulled Tommy's out because he wanted to match," Tubbo says, snapping his fingers, and Tommy shoves at him. With a smug smile, Tubbo puts his chin in his hand. "And you say *I'm* the clingy one. I'm not the one pulling bones out my face to be matching, bossman."

Huffing, Tommy returns to his stew, then remembers a particularly embarrassing moment for Tubbo. "Hah! I've got you beat, bitch, you cried for *days* when you had to go back home after staying with us for those few months," Tommy says triumphantly, and Puffy's smile wavers, whereas Tubbo just rolls his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, you fuckin' did, didn't you, you clingy fuck. I remember you clinging to me going 'Wah, wah, I don't wanna leave my Tommy!'"

"Fuck off, you were losing your shit as well, dumbass," Tubbo scoffs, and Tommy refuses to admit that he does, in fact, remember clinging to Tubbo in return and screaming his little lungs out. "Anyways, it's not nearly as embarrassing as you falling on your ass trying to ride a bike, which you *still can't do*."

"I can *so* ride a fuckin' bike, Tubbo, fuck you!" Tommy shoots back, and Puffy gives both of them a flat look. Right. Their playful bickering *can* get kind of loud sometimes. "Anyways, I barely remember why you and Foolish were staying at mine for so long, but I *do* remember that you refused to eat anything but Kristin's homemade waffles for breakfast for the first two weeks."

Grinning mischievously, Tubbo nods. "I was a little nightmare," he says, like he's proud of it, and Tommy assumes he probably is. "Oh! Remember when Wilbur fell off the swingset and Foolish was the only one who could stop him from crying by pissing him off with those anteater stickers? That was fuckin' funny."

"Yeah, Techno was freaking the fuck out," Tommy snickers, and Puffy sighs, rubbing at her temples. "And Phil was absolutely *done with us*, imagine having to chase a bunch of shithead kids around the yard because they stole your fuckin' hat!"

Tubbo cackles. "Shit, I forgot we did that!" he snorts, and Tommy's shoulders shake as he laughs. The two of them compose themselves a bit, and Tubbo hums, idly pushing around the last dregs of his stew in the bowl. "I remember Kristin was really good about nightmares. Tech was too, but he slept like a rock most of the time."

Tommy's half-tempted to say that Techno's still good about nightmares, but he feels like he'd never hear the end of it. "Techno broke his wrist in his sleep one time and nobody realized until he came downstairs with a bone sticking out," Tommy says instead, and Puffy makes a face.

"Ugh, don't say that while we're eating," she says, and Tommy gives her an apologetic grimace, shoulders up by his ears. Yeah, probably not the best topic of discussion for the dinner table, but it had at least made Tubbo laugh. "In any case, it's a miracle *you* haven't

managed to do that, Tommy, judging by how often I hear you fall off of the air mattress.”

“That’s because Tubbo pushes me off of it when I keep talking past three in the morning,” Tommy tells her, and Tubbo very nearly pushes him off the barstool. Tommy gestures towards him, eyes narrowed. “Case in point.”

Puffy huffs out a laugh and starts packing a tupperware container of stew. “Well, I *do* think you should be asleep before three in the morning, but sometimes your brain just can’t stop thinking,” she says easily, and Tommy nods eagerly. That’s exactly it, Puffy’s so great. She snaps the lid on, humming as she does, and Tommy finishes off the last of his stew. “Y’know, Toms, I saw this really nice sweater the other day, it made me think of you.”

At that, Tommy perks up, but his suspicions raise as soon as Tubbo starts trying to stifle his laughter. “What’s on the sweater...?” he asks, squinting, and Puffy visibly fights to keep the smile off her face.

“A raccoon,” she answers, and Tubbo leans his head on his arms, laughter muffled by the countertop, and Tommy glares at Puffy. “No, no, it was cute! It was, like, this little raccoon peeking its head out of a trashcan, it was *so* cute.”

“Is this what I am to you, Puffy?” Tommy asks, hand over his heart in mock offense, and Puffy covers her mouth, clearly stifling her laughter. “A garbage creature in a bin? That’s how you think of me?”

“She’s not wrong,” Tubbo says, still muffled, and Tommy shoves at him. “Fuck off, don’t make me fall!”

“I will make you fall *so* fast, Tubbo, don’t even test me,” Tommy says, and he and Tubbo start to make mad attempts to shove each other off of their chairs.

Puffy whistles, two fingers in her mouth-it’s that fancy kind of whistle that Tommy’s only ever seen Kristin, Phil, and Sally do-and she glares playfully at the two of them. “You’re both insufferable and you’re getting broth everywhere, go wash your hands, you grubby

children,” she says, taking their mostly empty bowls, and Tommy pushes past Tubbo, locking the door to the downstairs bathroom behind him.

Tubbo groans and slumps against the door, judging by the quiet *thud*, and Tommy grins, glancing at himself in the mirror. He’s still visibly not getting enough sleep, but he’s hardly tired; the bags under his eyes aren’t a reflection of actual exhaustion. At least he doesn’t look outwardly hungry anymore. His hair looks a little darker than usual, which is odd, but that’s probably because it hardly sees the sun. Tommy could definitely do with a haircut, too. His eyes still have that slightly weird, glowy quality, which is probably, y’know, his superpowers at work. At least his carnivorous-leaning diet hasn’t made his teeth sharp or anything crazy noticeable like that.

He shudders at his own reflection.

There’s a few impatient knocks on the door, and Tommy jumps, turning the faucet on and washing his hands like he’s supposed to have been doing. “Hurry up, dickhead,” Tubbo says, and Tommy opens the door without drying his hands off, flicking water into Tubbo’s face and cackling as he sputters. “Oh, *fuck you*, Tommy, I swear to God-”

“Boys! No water fighting! The floorboards are still warped from the last time!” Puffy calls from the kitchen, and Tubbo glares at Tommy.

“I *will* get my revenge,” Tubbo says, and Tommy pats him on the shoulder with a still-damp hand, and Tubbo shoves him out of the way.

“Sure you will,” Tommy says, and Tubbo flips him off.

Tommy finally got a break! Nothing like a little Mario Kart to lift your spirits :)

Also, y’all being absolutely terrified at the notion of an Uncle Ben

situation is very funny to me. Not for the reasons you're probably thinking of, but still.

Anyways!! I hope you guys liked this chapter, I always look forward to seeing the comments :D you guys are always super sweet and supportive, I'm so happy so many people are enjoying this story so far!

the carnival (i)

Chapter 20: the carnival (i)

The carnival fundraiser is finally here, and Tommy's just going to sit back, relax, and... oh, shit.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The lights are sparkling like multicolored stars, flashing and twinkling in rhythm and in contrast to the music pumping through evenly distributed speakers. The smell of deep-fried and spicy and sweet food drifts throughout the fairgrounds, each one distinct and mingling with one another at the same time. There are voices calling out in glee, in excitement-laced fear, in anticipation and triumph. Families chatter, siblings bicker, volunteers call out to patrons, all of them in costume. Tommy is just dressed as a generic zombie, but some of these costumes are really decked out, and his alter ego's a pretty popular costume this year, as it turns out.

It's chaos and tranquility, it's too much and not enough all at once.

This is going to be fucking incredible.

Tommy bounces in place as he hands over Wilbur's twenty pound note to Sam, who's evidently been tasked with running the ticket booth. Techno, Kristin, and Phil probably aren't too far behind him, but Tommy's too excited to wait for them. "Well, well, well, look who's here to wreak havoc on the carnival," Sam says, amused, and he puts the note in a money lockbox, handing over Tommy's tickets. Oh, *fuck* yeah.

"Thanks, Sam!" Tommy says, waving over his shoulder as he hands his ticket to the attendant in front of the entrance, who gives him a

little yellow stick-on bracelet, one of the ones that you can't get off without scissors, and he glances around. There are brightly-colored booths *everywhere*, and he can see some of his teachers behind them, calling out to patrons and peers, gesturing to the prizes on display. Tommy's going to kick *ass* at all these games.

"No using your powers to win carnival games, kid, it's unfair to everybody else," Techno mutters, nudging him in the side, and Tommy jumps, eyes wide. Techno chuckles, and he nods towards the towering swing ride. "You gonna go on that, or did swinging from building to building not cure your fear of heights?"

Tommy's brow furrows. "Techno, I haven't been afraid of heights since I was seven," he says, and Kristin and Phil start to approach, each with their own yellow bracelet secured firmly on their wrists. They're dressed as that couple from *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Tommy cups his hands around his mouth. "Hurry up! I wanna go on the pirate ship!"

Techno looks a little sheepish, and Tommy pokes him in the forehead. The sheepish expression quickly becomes one of flat unamusement. "Don't antagonize each other, just for tonight," Phil pleads, and Kristin gives his hand an affectionate squeeze. Tommy makes a face. Disgusting. "If I leave you to your own devices, you won't burn down the carnival, right?"

Before either of them can answer, everyone's attention is drawn to the main path, lit by street lamps of all different colors on either side. Quackity himself stands with a megaphone, looking like a ringleader straight out of the circus. It's honestly kind of a cool look for him. With a grin, he lifts the megaphone up to his mouth and throws up his other hand.

"Come one, come all, to *Carnival de Las Nevadas*! It is our absolute *pleasure* to have you all here with us tonight!" he says, and Tommy whoops and cheers along with the rest of the crowd. Techno looks slightly wary, but Tommy writes that off easily; Techno's not a big fan of people, after all. Quackity gestures widely out in front of him. "We've got games! Prizes! Rides! Attractions! Anything your heart desires, you will find it here tonight! So go out! Have fun! And don't forget-what happens in Las Nevadas, *stays* in Las Nevadas!"

Another round of deafening cheers sounds, and Tommy's cheeks start to hurt with how much he's been grinning. He glances around again, still in awe of how fucking incredible everything looks, and he spots a very familiar tall figure wearing a mask and sunglasses trying to win a prize at the basketball booth.

"Oi! Ranboob!" he calls, waving his arms above his head, and Ranboo looks around wildly, shoulders slumping with relief as he spots Tommy. His costume is weird; he's got a button up with lemons all over it and a pair of devil horns. Tommy tugs Techno over, because he's, like, eighty-five percent sure that Techno will stick to the sidelines and avoid everyone if Tommy doesn't bring him along. Tommy grins up at Ranboo, who runs a hand through his hair. "Have you won anything yet, big man?"

"No, I suck at this," Ranboo says with a shrug, and Tommy snorts. Ranboo blinks in slight surprise at Techno, who is actively attempting to make himself look as small as humanly possible. "Oh, uh, hey, Techno."

Techno nods, avoiding any and all eye contact. Tommy blows out a breath as he looks out over the crowd again. "So, is Tubbo here yet?" he asks, and Ranboo shrugs. Tommy just hums, then grins. "Wanna go ride a bunch of bullshit rides?"

"You know I do," Ranboo says easily, and Tommy knows he's grinning. He leads their little group to the swings ride-because he *isn't* afraid of heights anymore, Techno-and they take their seats in the same row. Ranboo snaps his fingers, and Tommy tilts his head. "I remember riding this at a county fair one time. It was much smaller than this one, though. This is, like, Six Flags quality stuff."

"The fuck is a Six Flags?" Tommy asks as the ride starts, and he lurches forward as the swings do. Techno is holding onto the chains for dear life. Ranboo looks perfectly at ease, leaning back and crossing his arms. It reminds Tommy of the way Phil will sit on the couch before falling asleep while watching a movie. "Hey, Tech, you good over there?"

Techno makes a sound somewhere between an affirming hum and a groan. "Remind me to never, *ever* tease you about heights ever

again,” he says, and Tommy snorts. He looks over, and Ranboo’s still at ease, probably enjoying the breeze. “Is this, like, at all similar to... that?”

Tommy’s brows furrow in confusion, but Techno’s doing the little hand thing that Tommy does to expel webs-very subtly, cheers to him-and Tommy nods. “Yeah, kind of,” he hums, shutting his eyes and enjoying the sensation of wind whipping through his hair. He doesn’t get much of *this* swinging through London. He glances at Ranboo again, barking out a laugh at the way his hair’s being tossed around. “You havin’ a nice time there, boob boy?”

“I was until you called me that,” Ranboo says with no bite behind his words, and he’s probably smiling. The swings start to slow and lower, and Ranboo ruffles his hair back into place. He glances over at Techno, and Tommy turns to look too, brows furrowed. “Uh. Is your brother, like... okay?”

“I’m fine,” Techno mumbles, visibly becoming relieved as their feet touch the ground. He lurches forward a little as he clammers out of the seat, then clears his throat, suddenly looking far more composed than he’d just been. “Right. Where are you draggin’ me next?”

Tommy hums thoughtfully, glancing around. They could do the ferris wheel, or the mini-coaster, or some booths. “Oh, hey, isn’t that Mr. Soot?” Ranboo asks before Tommy can decide on something, and he and Techno look over to where he’s pointing. Sure enough, there’s Wilbur, standing next to Fundy in the balloon pop game booth.

He looks *ridiculous*. Tommy grins.

As the three of them head over, Techno nudges Ranboo. “You know you can just call him Wilbur, right? Plus, Soot is his *middle* name. Dunno why he doesn’t just go by Watson at your school,” he says as they approach the booth, and Tommy hands Fundy a five pound note for three darts.

“I go by Mr. Soot because under no circumstances do I want people associating me with Tommy,” Wilbur answers, and Tommy glowers at him, throwing his first dart directly into a bright red balloon and

popping it without looking. Fundy's eyes go wide. Wilbur adjusts his cheesy top hat and straightens his red-and-white pinstripe vest. Tommy and Ranboo try not to laugh.

Techno snorts. "Nice outfit, Wil," he says as Tommy takes a picture of Wilbur's ridiculous outfit, and Wilbur flips them both off. A mother gasps and covers a very small child's eyes nearby. Wilbur smiles apologetically and waves as they dash off; Tommy bursts out laughing. Techno raises a brow. "Quackity's not gonna be too happy if he catches you scarin' off potential donors."

Fundy nods in agreement, and Tommy tosses the next dart into a green balloon. It pops too, and Ranboo gives him a rather sarcastic round of applause. "One more, kid," Fundy says, and his walkie-talkie beeps.

"*Ginger. I need you by the funhouse asap,*" Quackity's voice says from the intercom, and Tommy pierces a purple balloon with his last dart, throwing his hands in the air and whooping in triumph.

"On my way," Fundy says, and he glances at Wilbur skeptically. It very clearly pisses him off, and Tommy glances nervously between them. "Can you handle the booth on your own, or should I go get someone to run it with you?"

Wilbur scoffs and gestures vaguely towards the prize pile as he starts to tell Fundy that no, he does not, in fact, need help running one of the least popular games. Tommy starts scanning over the prizes, trying to decide between a little moth plush and a spider. "Spider's a bit on the nose," Techno mutters, and Tommy steps on his foot. "I'm just *saying*."

Ranboo leans closer to the two of them, clearly wary of the now heated argument Wilbur and Fundy are having, which mostly consists of the words *Quackity is such an assshole* and *I'm the one in charge here, Wilbur*. "What are we whispering about?" Ranboo mumbles, and Tommy groans as Fundy mutters something under his breath and starts to head off.

"Have you decided what you want?" Wilbur asks flatly, and Tommy points at the moth. He's a bigger fan of them anyway, despite his

alter ego. Wilbur blows out a puff of air that makes his fringe flutter as he hands Tommy the tiny thing, and he seems to relax minutely. "You guys enjoying the carnival so far? It actually seems pretty decent."

"We've only been on one ride, Wil," Tommy scoffs as he smiles down at the little moth. "Oh, I am *so* badass, one game in and I've already won shit, I'm so cool-"

"Hey, dickheads!" Tubbo's voice rings out, and Tommy turns to see him waving frantically in a Spider-Man costume next to Puffy, who's dressed as a pirate and apologizing to that mother from before, and Foolish, who gives them an easygoing nod in his shark costume. Tubbo gets there first, and Tommy gives him a fist bump. "Won something already? Nice going, bossman. Hey, Ranboo, Techno, Wil. Christ, Tommy wasn't lying about those uniforms."

Wilbur scowls as the rest of them stifle their laughter. "Hi, Ms. Puffy, hey, Foolish," Ranboo says before anything semi-resembling an argument can break out again, and Puffy ruffles his hair affectionately. "You guys been here a while?"

"Nah, we just got here. *Somebody's* forgotten how to properly drive," Puffy teases, reaching up to pinch Foolish's cheek, and he goes a bit red. Puffy outstretches her arms with a grin, and Techno joins Foolish in going red in the face. At his hesitation, Puffy pouts. "Too old to give your Aunt Puffy a hug, Tech? I'm hurt, really, I am."

Glaring at the rest of them, as if challenging them to say a word, Techno gives Puffy what has got to be, in Tommy's opinion, the world's stiffest of hugs. "Hullo, Puffy," he mumbles as he pulls away, and Puffy beams. Tommy's barely-stifled laughter earns him a glower, and Techno's elbow juts into his side momentarily. He nods at the other adults, and Tommy kicks at his ankles. "We should leave the children to their own devices. I do *not* need to go on another ride."

Tubbo grins and tugs Tommy and Ranboo by the wrists now that they've essentially-not really-gotten permission to go off on their own. "You fuckers have no *idea* how excited I've been for this!" Tubbo cheers, leading them straight for the ferris wheel, and the

three of them hand their tickets over. "Right, so I'm thinking after this, we go to the hall of mirrors, then the funhouse, then the coaster-

"We should have a break somewhere in there for food," Ranboo cuts in, and Tubbo nods eagerly as the three of them squish into one cart with Tubbo in the middle. As they start to go up, Ranboo glances at the skyline and points up at a cluster of stars that, to Tommy, look like a jumbled mess. "Hey, that's Cygnus."

"The fuck are you on about?" Tommy asks as the cart goes higher. Tubbo's just grinning out at the fairgrounds; Tommy just assumes he can't make heads or tails of whatever the fuck Ranboo's trying to point out either. "What the hell is a sig-seeg-sick nuts?"

Sighing in exasperation, Ranboo nudges Tubbo and Tommy tries his hardest to follow along as Ranboo traces the shape of... something along the stars. "Cygnus. It's a swan, see? And it tells the story of-ah, what was his name again? Orcus? Something like that, I can't remember," Ranboo mumbles, and Tommy squints. Ranboo tuts. "The guy with the-! He was trying to lead that girl out of the underworld..."

Tommy snaps his fingers. "Orpheus!" he says, eyes wide in realization. Then, he groans and tilts his head back, and their cart swings a little. Tubbo chuckles as Ranboo clutches the side of the cart. "God, Techno would not shut the *fuck* up about that story when he was, like, eleven. It was *so* dumb."

"I remember that! Wasn't that when I was staying with you guys?" Tubbo asks, and Tommy shrugs. It probably had been. Ranboo's still staring at the stars, looking rather content, and Tubbo nudges him lightly. "You havin' a good time, bossman?"

"Yeah," Ranboo says, "I'm happy to be here with you guys."

"Me too," Tubbo says with a grin, and he bumps Tommy's arm with his shoulder.

Huffing, Tommy glances out the opposite direction. "You're both fuckin' clingy, I am having a miserable time."

The cart swings precariously as both of his friends lurch towards him to smother him with affection. Tommy can't help but grin.

After going on all of the rides that Tubbo had been dying to go on, and after witnessing Ranboo lose to several of the carnival games at the booths, the three of them decide to meet back up with their families. As they wait in line at a funnel cake stand-something completely foreign to Tommy and Tubbo, but Ranboo had insisted-Tommy texts Phil and tells him where they're at.

"Phil says he's with Puffy and the lot of them, they'll meet us here," he informs his friends as Ranboo bounces slightly in place, clearly ridiculously excited at the idea of whatever the hell a funnel cake is. Tubbo beams too, and Tommy finds himself being happier than he's felt in a *while*. "Right, boob boy, the fuck are we about to eat?"

Rubbing his hands together like some kind of fruitfly, Ranboo hums. "They're kinda like these little spirals of doughy cake stuff, they've usually got some powdered sugar on them," he explains, and Tubbo perks up significantly.

Tommy, on the other hand, makes a face. "So it's sweet?" he asks, nose scrunched up in distaste, and Ranboo nods, visibly concerned as to why Tommy wouldn't want a food that's apparently really delicious. Then again, Ranboo is an American, so his opinion cannot be trusted nonetheless. "Well, you and Tubs enjoy that, then, / will be getting a kebab."

A short little huff of fond annoyance draws his attention to Tubbo, who pokes him in the side, and Tommy squirms. Bastard. "Figures, you weirdo," he says, and Tommy flips him off. As it turns out, Tubbo spots their families, because he starts waving and raises his voice. "Over here, guys! Come get fuckel cake-"

"*Funnel* cake!" Ranboo corrects hurriedly, and Tommy bursts out laughing as they move up to the front of the line. Slumping his shoulders in defeat, Ranboo hands the attendant a twenty pound note and sighs. "Two funnel cakes and three water bottles, please."

The attendant nods and hands over the bottles, and they move to wait for their food, Phil, Kristin, Techno, Puffy, and Foolish joining them as they do. "Hey, nerds," Foolish says fondly, ruffling Tubbo's hair, "are you enjoying the festivities?"

"I *very* much enjoyed watching Ranboo fail to put a ring on a bottle, yes," Tommy says, and Ranboo sputters something about how they're rigged, and Tommy flicks his forehead. "You know what you sound like, Ranboob, you sound like-you're all '*meh meh meh meh, I can't win at kid's games, meh meh.*' That's you."

"Says you," Tubbo snorts, and Tommy narrows his eyes. "You've been clinging to that moth plush and haven't put it down, not even on the coaster."

"*Excuse* me, her name is *Clementine* and you will address her as such," Tommy hisses, and Tubbo rolls his eyes, making a stupid exaggerated show of it.

Puffy shakes her head fondly. Phil claps a hand on Tommy's shoulder. "Alright, alright, that's enough out of you lot," he says, and as Tommy goes to protest, he's met with a flat stare. "And no, I do not care who started it. I'm glad you boys are having fun, though. It's nice to see you three together again, it's been a while."

Kristin hums in agreement, and Ranboo grabs the funnel cakes. Glancing around, her brows furrowed, Puffy rolls her shoulders. "We should find a place to sit," she says, and their ragtag group starts looking around for a space large enough for all of them.

Thankfully, there's a group of tables nearby that Techno and Puffy manage to drag together, and Tommy sits between Ranboo and Kristin, picking the odd crumbs off of Ranboo's plate. The dough itself isn't unbearably sweet, but the main part is absolutely *drenched* in powdered sugar, which does a hell of a good job of staving Tommy off.

As he half-listens to everyone chat idly-probably catching up, Techno hasn't seen Puffy in a while and Foolish has just come to visit, after all-Tommy glances over at the hall of mirrors, which is one of the few places they hadn't actually gotten around to going in yet.

Tubbo kept getting distracted by rides on the way there.

There are a few figures lurking around the side, and Tommy squints at them; with his enhanced sight, he can make out that they've all got masks and fucking *holsters*, but they're dressed just like the rest of the volunteers. But Tommy had seen security, and they'd been wearing black shirts with 'SECURITY' across the chest in big white letters, and The Sense is telling him that *yes, Tommy, this is something you should fucking look out for, dumbass.*

"Uh, I'm gonna go use the bathroom," Tommy says, and he catches Techno's eye, widening his own and hoping that Techno will get the hint. After all, he hasn't got his suit, and Tubbo isn't at home, he's right there, so Techno's the only one he can give an explanation to at the moment.

Thankfully, as Tommy starts to walk away, hands clenching anxiously at his sides, a chair scrapes out. "I'll go with him so the gremlin doesn't get lost trying to find his way back," Techno says, and there are a few laughs from the table as he catches up with Tommy. Tommy pointedly nods at the side alley near the hall of mirrors, and Techno's brows furrow. "S'your Tommy Tingle goin' off or something? I don't see anyth-oh, that's... those are... definitely not good guys."

"No, they are not, and quit calling it my Tommy Tingle, bitch," Tommy grumbles. His fingers continue to curl, and Techno nudges them as they get closer to the funhouse, which is directly next to the hall of mirrors. "I don't have my suit, which fucking *sucks*, but I figure if I can get up to that balcony there, I can hop over to the roof of the hall of mirrors and listen in to whatever the fuck these nutters are up to, yeah?"

"What do you need me to do?" Techno asks, and Tommy's only slightly surprised at how willing Techno is to help. He gnaws at his bottom lip as they get closer to the funhouse, then stops abruptly in the middle of the pavement. Techno blinks at him. "What? What is it?"

Tommy gives him a slow grin. "I may or may not have a plan," he says, "and I need you to hear me out on this."

Techno sighs, eyes shut, but he crosses his arms and nods. "I'm listening."

This is how Tommy finds himself wearing a slightly-too-long-on-him volunteer uniform and a stupid bag with holes cut out for the eyes over his head, Clementine having been entrusted to Techno. In the front pocket of his stolen jacket, his phone is tucked away, and as he scales the back of the funhouse, Tommy keeps a wary eye out for anyone nearby.

"This is Arachnid to Pig Boy, can you hear me? Over," Tommy mumbles into his phone, and he hears Techno sigh. Tommy stifles a laugh as he ducks to hang upside-down underneath an awning as some people pass through, one hand securing his phone so that it doesn't fall. Techno still hasn't answered, so Tommy pouts. "C'mon, it's too stressful if you don't play along with the bit, Tech."

After a brief pause, Techno clears his throat. "*Pig Man to Arachnid Child, over,*" he mutters, and while Tommy could do without the child part, that'll do for now. "*The guys by the hall of mirrors are still talki-why, yes, Aunt Linda, I do miss our chats.*"

Tommy slips on top of the funhouse, making a face. "The fuck are you on about, big man?" he grumbles, and he watches the lights flashing on the ferris wheel. If he times it right, he should just be a silhouette against a black sky right in between the cycle of blue and gold.

"*I can't exactly make it obvious that I'm talking to a maniac on the rooftops,*" Techno hisses, and Tommy supposes he *does* have a point there. He leaps across the gap as the lights start to switch, and he's thankfully unnoticed. "*Are you at the hall of mirrors yet?*"

"Yep, I'm right on top of 'em, now shut up so I can hear," Tommy whispers, and thankfully, Techno doesn't protest. Tommy crawls ever-closer to the edge of the roof. He can hear pretty easily from up here.

There are three guys, all around the same-ish height, at least from

what he can see from his perch, and they've all got guns holstered at their sides. Not ideal. "Right, we should be good, everyone's busy enough for us to make the trade, Boss," the one closest to Tommy says, turning back from where he'd been glancing at the entrance of the side alley.

The one leaning on the far wall nods. "Good. I don't need anyone up my ass about this, understand? We get the shit and get going. Don't let them talk in circles. We're all business tonight, am I understood?" he says firmly, and Tommy definitely pins that one as the one in charge. The other two nod, the one closest to Tommy doing it sharply, and the other kind of relaxed. "Now, when they get here, you're in charge of handing over the money. Slime will take his case after the deal's done and transport it, and I am in charge of making sure we don't get fucked over again."

Tommy doesn't even have to wonder who this mysterious arms dealer is, because the van that pulls up to the chainlink fence is all too familiar. "Arachnid to Pig Man, they're buying weapons from Blaze. I'm pretty sure, anyway," he murmurs, and Techno hums-it would be monotone to anyone else, but Tommy knows that's his worried hum.

"Don't move in, you can't cause a scene at a fundraiser," Techno says, and Tommy supposes he has a point. Sure enough, here comes Blaze in the same getup as the last time Tommy had seen him. *"Just take note of what they've got and get back here. We've been gone way too long for just a bathroom break, so I'll buy you some food if you hurry as an excuse."*

Now *that's* an enticing offer.

So Tommy's happy to take it. Honestly, there's not much he *can* do, and it's probably a smart move to know what he'll be dealing with. Blaze approaches with two large black cases, and the guy in charge steps into the middle of the side alley. "Well, look who's finally decided to show his ugly mug," he says, and Blaze is probably pissed off. Tommy stifles a laugh as Blaze visibly stiffens, but Blaze holds up the cases, head tilted in inquiry. The guy in charge snaps his fingers, and the guy closest to Tommy steps forward, fishing a card out of his back pocket. The guy in charge holds out an

expectant hand, and Blaze hands him the cases. "Always a pleasure doing business, but why are you so quiet tonight? I expected more of a hassle, Sparky."

"He wants me to explain the functions and go. I'm not at liberty to disclose anything else with you at the moment, apparently, as much as I'd love to chat," Blaze answers, slightly frustrated, and whoever *he* is, it's evidently enough to make the guy in charge stiffen. "We had some... issues with the prototype. It's no longer an automated gun, it's a fitted gauntlet that releases a few hundred watts of electricity at will and enhances your strength. The other weapon you asked for was a challenge for us to develop, but I'm sure you'll be happy. Injection should take approximately ten minutes, so long as the subject is willing."

"A gauntlet and a symbiote... what fun toys," the guy in charge says, the other two falling in line behind him, and Tommy goes pale. What the fuck is he supposed to do about *that*?! The guy in charge hands the cases off to his men and pokes Blaze in the chest, leaving his finger there to rest. "Well, I hope to see you again soon, but I make no promises. I'm a very busy man, after all."

Blaze doesn't respond, but something in his posture shifts. Tommy's eyes narrow as the guy who'd had the payment steps closer to the guy in charge. "Boss, we should-"

"Nothing? Really? God, he's got *some* hold on you, doesn't he?" the guy in charge interrupts, and the guy who'd spoken looks annoyed. Tommy's really hoping for some more valuable information rather than pointless banter, but he's done his fair share of bantering pointlessly, so he supposes it's only karma. Waving his hands dismissively, the guy in charge reaches up to pat Blaze's cheek. "Until next time, then, Sparky."

With that, he turns, and his men follow him into the back room of the hall of mirrors. Tommy scrambles back, just in case Blaze or the other guys decide to look up. "*Tommy? Did you get any information?*" Techno asks, and Tommy swallows.

"Yeah, big man," he says, "lots."

Tommy rushes to get down and discards his stolen volunteer uniform, running towards where Techno's standing by a kebab stand. "Well, you look utterly terrified," Techno says, face pinched slightly in concern, and Tommy shakes him by the shoulders.

"Fuckin'! Techno, they have a *gauntlet* now," he whisper-yells, and Techno blinks as the attendant hands him a kebab, which he promptly hands over to Tommy. Ah, sweet sustenance; Tommy will have to thank Techno when he's not focused on this shit. "And a symbiote! I have to do something!"

Techno just shifts his shoulders up by his ears.

When the two of them return to the tables, it's to easy waves and a few cheers. "Took you two long enough! What held you up for so long?" Kristin asks, and Tommy's got his mouth stuffed with food, so he lets Techno answer.

"Tommy insisted on me buying him that," he says, gesturing to the half-devoured kebab in Tommy's hands, and Tommy grins. Puffy makes a face at the food that's probably still stuck in his teeth.

Tubbo and Ranboo stand, and Foolish joins them as they come over. "Hey, we were all gonna hit the teacups, you wanna come with?" Foolish asks, and Tommy shakes his head. He's got some investigating to get to. At least they're not going to the hall of mirrors. Foolish slings an arm around Tommy's shoulders. "Good to see you, by the way. I didn't even get to give you your souvenir since you two ran off so fast, man!"

Eyes wide at the notion of a gift, Tommy rips another chunk off the kebab with his teeth and holds out a hand expectantly. Foolish reaches into his pocket and places a little bracelet in Tommy's palm. "The fuck is this?" Tommy asks, ignoring as Phil lightheartedly scolds him for being rude.

"I gave one to Tubbo and Ranboo, too. If you guys all tap on it, it'll buzz n' stuff, so you guys can be clingy whenever you're away from each other," Foolish says easily, and Tubbo and Ranboo hold up their wrists with twin grins.

“I hate it,” Tommy says, slipping it on his wrist.

It’s one of the best presents he’s ever gotten.

Wooooo! Part 1 of the carnival is finally up! Gotta love a good Halloween week special, am I right?

the carnival (ii)

Chapter 21: the carnival (ii)

Tommy investigates the weapons deal a little further.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The carnival's still in full swing, and while Tommy's having a great time, he can't help it if The Sense is demanding he do something about those weapons.

Of course, it's not easy to convince Techno to cover for him while he lurks around, waiting for one of the many costumed patrons to leave a Spider-Man mask lying around. And he *does* feel bad taking the mask, but he's got to swing home and grab his suit. He's not about to let those guys ruin Big Q's carnival with weapons like that.

Tommy dips into his room, placing Clementine gently on his dresser next to Henry, and he whips off the stolen mask, not bothering to scrub the zombie facepaint off of his face as he gets changed and dashes right back out the window. A few civilians-some dressed as him-try to flag him down for a selfie, but Tommy pretends not to see them; he's a man on a mission, after all. He swings back to the fairground and discreetly perches on a nearby cell tower.

"Spider-Man? What're you doing out right now?" Tubbo's voice says from the comms, and Tommy stiffens up. He can hear the sounds of the carnival both where he is and through the comms, but on Tubbo's end, they're slightly muffled. *"Is there something you need me to help with? I'm at a school fundraiser thing with some friends and family, I'm on my phone, but I can pretend to be sick if you want help!"*

"No, no, there's no need, just... I'm at the same place you are, I got a tip from someone that they saw shady figures at the fundraiser," he lies, and Tubbo makes a noise of surprise. Tommy tries to sneak from attraction to attraction, staying stealthy as he slowly but surely makes his way towards the hall of mirrors. "I need a favor. Keep everyone you can away from the hall of mirrors, got it? I wanna take care of this quietly, the last thing I want to do is cause a panic."

Something shifts on Tubbo's end, and Tommy hears the carnival get louder on his end. "*I'm on it, bossman,*" he says before he hangs up, and Tommy lets out a sigh of relief. He perches on the roof, watching below as Tubbo walks up to the attendant-the chemistry teacher, if Tommy recalls correctly-and starts rambling.

They tell him something, and Tubbo seems satisfied, glancing up nonchalantly and grinning when he spots Tommy up at the top of the hall of mirrors. Tommy shoots him a thumbs-up and slips down the side of the building, strolling out in front of it as innocently as possible. "Hey there! Can I go in?" he asks, and the teacher nods.

"Another Spider-Man, eh? Real original," they say sarcastically, and Tommy has half a mind to flip them off, but he's got business to take care of. They open the door for him, and Tommy slips in, jumping a little when the door closes behind him.

Okay, so this is *really fucking cool*.

The hall of mirrors is pretty self-explanatory, but the lights give it a sort of eerie atmosphere; if Tommy weren't so concerned with the crazy weaponry that's at risk here, he'd be enjoying himself immensely. He hops up to the ceiling and reaches out towards the nearest mirror, relieved to find that they don't go all the way up. He crawls to the back and carefully wrenches away the vent to the back room, which is presumably where the three men from earlier are.

Bingo.

"I'm *telling you*, he's not gonna show," the boss says, and Tommy narrows his eyes. The guy that had been in charge of the payment is pacing, and the other dude, Slime, is just chilling in the corner, fiddling with the handles of the cases. "He has no idea that a trade

even went down tonight, we covered up our tracks better this time.”

“And *I’m* telling you, he’s here somewhere, I can feel it,” the pacing guy snarls. The boss stands and crosses his arms; it’s clearly imposing, if the way the other guy immediately cowers at the sudden attention is anything to go by. “Sorry, Boss, I just-I’m on edge, and Slime’s putting off the injection, I mean, seriously, hurry up!”

Boss-Tommy’s decided that’s what he’ll be called now-shoves the other guy *hard*, and he hits the wall, posture like that of a scared animal. “Who the fuck are *you* to question him?! I put him directly in charge of you, don’t forget that,” Boss snarls, and the other guy lowers his head; Tommy keeps an eye on Slime. They’re all still masked, which is annoying, because if he could see their faces, it’d be so much easier to give a description to the public. “I need you with me here, not in your little mental panic room, Vos.”

Aha! Another name.

Vos nods, hands shaking with barely concealed rage at his sides. “Of course, Boss,” he says easily, and Tommy’s brows furrow. Vos looks over at Slime, who finally seems to have come to a decision. “You ready?”

Slime nods, and Vos takes one of the cases and leads him out. Tommy debates on whether to follow them or try to take the other case, but before he can make a decision, Boss looks directly up at the ceiling-up at *him*. “There you are, little spider,” he says, and Tommy’s eyes go wide.

“Uh, I’m... this is my Halloween costume?” Tommy tries, and Boss grabs the gauntlet from the other case, slamming it on. Ah, shit. Tommy drops down into the room and puts his hands in front of his chest. “Listen, Boss-can I call you Boss?-I’m just here to take that little glove from you and go home, no need to ruin a carnival, yeah?”

Boss leans into his walkie-talkie, and *wow*, these guys are pretty well-coordinated, and narrows his eyes at Tommy. “Keep everyone out of the hall of mirrors,” he says as the gauntlet starts to glow purple, almost in a skeletal pattern, and Tommy squares his shoulders.

“At least you and I have the same priority. Can’t have the public too *shocked*, if you catch my- *oomph!*” Tommy’s abruptly cut off as Boss punches him in the gut with the gauntlet, and he’s thrown *through the fucking wall*. He skids to a stop against a mirror-because fucking duh-and he stands, shaking the ache out of his bones. “Well *that’s* rude, I was in the middle of my sentence, man.”

Boss’s metal-covered fingertips crackle with indigo lightning, and Tommy feels a pit of anxiety in his gut as he hops back up on the ceiling and drops down in another section of the maze. It’s fine, he can work with this. “Oh, *Spider-Man!* Come out, come out wherever you are!” Boss croons, and Tommy shudders, making sure his footsteps are as quiet as possible as he feels along the walls.

The lighting flickers slightly as a mirror shatters a little ways behind him, and Tommy’s *really* tempted to jump up, but Boss is probably gonna be keeping an eye on the ceiling for him. That’s simply not ideal. He continues to wind his way through the maze; he’s got no fucking clue where he’s going, but if he’s got any hope of *not* being electrocuted, he’ll have to sneak up on Boss.

Tommy flinches as the lights flicker again, the sound of glass shattering accompanying it, and he finds himself in, presumably, the middle room of the maze; there are mirrors all around him, each reflecting the image of Tommy visibly wary. He takes a moment to pause and really look at himself, squaring his shoulders and shooting finger guns at the one directly in front of him.

“Big man Spidey, lookin’ good,” he says quietly, then promptly stifles his laughter, because if he gets caught while doing stupid poses in the mirror, Techno’d never let him hear the end of it.

The carnival music playing over the speakers slows and glitches as the lights flicker and more glass shatters, then starts back up again as if it were never warped in the first place. Tommy shudders, and The Sense starts to prick at the back of his neck. He turns around rapidly, but none of the mirrors have changed; it’s still him in the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, there’s Boss, sixth-

There's Boss.

Tommy's sent through *several* mirrored walls as Boss punches him, and a jolt of electricity shakes through his whole body. It takes a good five seconds for Tommy's body to stop shaking uncontrollably. Five seconds that he *doesn't have*. He hops up on the ceiling, leaping out of the way as Boss sends a blast of indigo lightning right towards him; it leaves a smoldering mark on the ceiling. At least it's probably not lethal.

Panting, Tommy drops down and *books it*. There's no way he's gonna be able to take on Boss face-to-face, at least not without some kind of nonconductive insulation. Tommy doesn't exactly want to end up like a squirrel stuck in an electric fence, so his best option is, again, sneaking up from behind. But it's virtually impossible in the hall of mirrors, so Tommy starts to formulate a half-baked idea.

If he makes it out of the maze, he can blend in with the crowd and keep an eye on Boss to corner him. But he has to find his way out without being caught first, and that's proving to be quite an issue, given that he's bumped into *several* mirrored walls so far, which only draws more attention to himself.

Tommy dodges another electrified punch from Boss and *sprints*. At least The Sense seems to have somewhat caught on, and it starts to warn him every time he's about to run face-first into another goddamn mirror. "C'mon, Spider-Man, don't be shy! I'm not gonna *hurt you*, I've got orders specifically to take you in alive," Boss says, and *that's* very concerning.

"No can do! I'd rather not be fried, thanks!" Tommy pants, dodging yet another punch, and his hair sticks to his face with the static that whizzes by him. He leaps over the mirror wall and starts running again, only to groan as Boss just punches his way through. Tommy huffs in annoyance. "You know, this is actually the first time I've faced a criminal chasing *me* instead of the other way around, and I can't say I'm a fan!"

Boss laughs behind him, and it sounds like an honest laugh, not a bitter one like Blaze's or an incredulous one like 404's, which is another very weird aspect of this whole thing. "I'm not gonna *fry*

you!" Boss says, and Tommy thinks the way he says it is very reminiscent of a kid playing tag. This is slightly disturbing. "Don't make me keep chasing after you, man!"

"Again, I prefer *not* being electrocuted!" Tommy yelps as he dodges another blast of electricity, swinging up and over a good few walls. He can vaguely make out the entrance. Boss doesn't seem too happy about the fact that he's gonna escape, which probably explains why Tommy's ankle gets grabbed mid-jump the next time he tries.

He's abruptly slammed into the ground, and Boss stands over him, gauntlet pointed directly at his chest. Oh, *shit*. "Well, it's been a pleasure meeting you," Boss tells him smugly, and Tommy's chest heaves as he looks around. "Unfortunately, I've gotta-agh! What the *fuck* was that?!"

Boss clutches the back of his head and growls a few swears under his breath as he turns around, and Tommy scrambles to his feet, latching immediately onto Boss's back and scrambling for the gauntlet. Unfortunately for the both of them, Tommy is *much* taller than Boss, so they fall backwards, Tommy still grappling for the gauntlet and Boss still struggling to shrug him off.

Tommy flips them over with all the strength left in his legs and promptly elbows Boss's temple, trying his hardest to pull the gauntlet off. Every time he touches it, though, a shockwave briefly wracks through his body, and he scrambles away from Boss's unconscious form, still a little shaky from the excess electricity.

"Are you okay?!" someone demands next to him, and Tommy jumps into a defensive stance, only to ease out of it when he realizes it's not one of Boss's goons, but *Tubbo* standing there with his hands in the air. "It's me, it's me! I threw a big shard of glass at him, and I *know* you said to keep everyone away from the hall of mirrors, but there were volunteers that already had that covered, and your comms weren't connecting, so I ran in the back!"

"The gauntlet must've short-circuited them," Tommy mutters, and he *would* run a hand through his hair if he weren't masked. The gesture translates into him awkwardly smoothing a hand over the top of his

head. "Right, well. Thank you. Seriously."

"Y-Yeah, man, of course," Tubbo says, and Tommy snorts at how embarrassed he looks. Then, his costume registers, and Tommy bursts out laughing, hands clutching at his sides. Boss starts to stir at the noise, and Tommy webs him to the floor, still shaking with laughter rather than the effects of electricity now. Tubbo crosses his arms. "Don't *even*, I'm not-I just thought it would be *cool*, okay, I'm not-! Stop *laughing* at me!"

He swats half-heartedly at Tommy's shoulder, and Tommy composes himself, though he does have to stifle another snort when Tubbo fidgets with the hoodie part of his Halloween costume nervously. "Right, right, I'm sorry. It's just-I forget you're such a *fan*," he says, and Tubbo groans, pushing past him towards the entrance. "Woah, woah, we're going through the back, dude, I'm not about to get caught, and neither are you."

Tubbo nods. "Good point. So... how do we get through to the back?" he asks, and Tommy thinks for a moment. He could easily just get up on the ceiling and crawl his way there, but he doesn't exactly want to leave Tubbo behind.

After a brief pause, he puts his hands on Tubbo's shoulders. "How do you feel about being upside-down?" he asks, and Tubbo lights up.

The two of them walk through the crowd. It's kind of nice not to be noticed, being just a single Spider-Man in a crowd of them, but Tommy is *very* wary of the fact that someone is looking out over the carnival. It's probably Boss's goons, and he *knows* he just looks like another kid in a costume-ironic, considering that's technically what he is-but he's still a little nervous.

Tubbo seems to be just as nervous, which is understandable considering he had just thrown glass at a nutjob with an electrified gauntlet, but he gets visibly *more* nervous when the two of them bump into Puffy. "Tubbo! There you are, we were looking all over for you! Ranboo left a little while ago, we couldn't find you," she says,

and he grins apologetically. Puffy notices Tommy, who stiffens. "Oh, is this a friend of yours?"

Tommy waits for Tubbo to figure this one out. "Uh, it's just Tommy!" he says, and Tommy wants to scream. Tubbo nods eagerly. "Yeah, I went to go find him, turns out he went to change costumes, y'know? Anyways, um-! You guys good?"

"Yeah, we were gonna head home soon. You comin' with, or are you gonna hitch a ride with Tommy?" Foolish asks, and Tubbo frowns in thought.

Tommy says nothing for fear that if he does, Tubbo will put together the fact that he is, in fact, actually Tommy. "Ah, yeah, I-I'll head home with you guys," Tubbo says to Puffy, who smiles and ruffles his hair. Tubbo glances at him, eyes wide. "You, uh, gonna be good to make your way back, bossman?"

Nodding, Tommy waves as the three of them head for the exit. He sighs, shoulders slumping in relief. Slipping through the crowd, Tommy makes his way back behind a building and takes his mask off. Not that he needs to hide it, but still, it'd be nice to blink without feeling panicked that someone'll see it.

He joins back in with the rest of the crowd, and he's surprised to be met face-to-face by a very panicked-looking Quackity. "Oh! Tommy! Great to see you, nice costume, are you-is that a zombie Spider-Man? Creative," he appraises, and he sounds out of breath, his clothes all disheveled. "Hey, uh, have you seen Charlie? Or Fundy?"

"No, can't say I have, Big Q," Tommy says, apologetic, and Quackity groans, taking off his red top hat to run his hand through his hair. Tommy should probably get back to his family sooner rather than later, but Quackity's really nice, and he looks pretty stressed. "I could help you look, if you need."

Quackity waves dismissively. "Nah, I've got it under control, you just worry about having fun, okay, kiddo?" he ruffles Tommy's hair affectionately and gives him a pat on the back before starting to push his way through the crowd again.

Tommy grabs his phone and shoots a text to Techno, asking where he is. Techno doesn't respond, so Tommy calls him. "I am heading back home, tell Phil and Kristin I'm getting a ride with Tubbo. I'm not, but tell them that anyway," he barks out as Techno picks up, shouldering his way past an Alice and Mad Hatter.

"Fine. How'd it go?" Techno asks, and Tommy just sighs. *"That bad, huh? Did you at least get any of those... things back?"*

"No," Tommy grumbles, passing a group of Spider-Men, and he finally makes it to the exit, waving goodbye to Sam as he heads toward the nearest alleyway. "Anyway, I'm gonna swing by Tubbo's to get my comms repaired, then I'll head home."

"Alright, but Phil's getting cranky like the old man he is, we'll probably be leaving soon too," he says, and Tommy snorts as Phil's protesting starts up in the background. *"See you at home."*

"See you," Tommy says, and there's a heavy pause there before he hangs up, like they'd both wanted to say something else. Tommy tugs his mask back on as soon as he's out of sight from the general public and swings off in the direction of Tubbo's house.

The breeze is really nice, and it's soothing the heat still dancing under his skin; Tommy's always run a little warmer than the average person, but this is different. It almost feels like it's the remnants of the electricity, still pulsing and wired. Tommy takes a few deep breaths as he continues to *thwip* and swing through London, wincing when there's a familiar piercing pain in his chest. His ribs are probably bruised from those punches.

As he lands on Tubbo's bedroom window, Tommy takes a minute to calm himself. His hands are shaking, but the electric pulsing had stopped a while ago. It's probably fine, probably a leftover reaction from it, but he'll ask Techno to make sure there's nothing wrong just in case.

Tubbo's door opens, and Tommy gives his best friend a wave. "Oh my God, what're you *doing* out there? Come in, come in," Tubbo says, shutting the door behind him and letting Tommy in through the window. "Have you come to get the comms fixed?"

Tommy nods. "Yeah, figured it'd be better to get that done now rather than later," he says, sounding pretty tired, even to himself, and Tubbo's brows pinch in concern. "D'you-can I sit down somewhere, man?"

Leading Tommy to the bed, Tubbo frets a little. "Of course, just stay here, let me grab your old mask so you don't have to stand in the corner or something," he jokes, still clearly worried, and Tommy rubs at his temples. He's got a killer headache all of a sudden. Tubbo frowns. "You alright, bossman? I don't have any painkillers strong enough to work with your metabolism, but I can get you some water or something while you switch masks."

"That would be nice," Tommy says in a voice much smaller than himself, and as soon as Tubbo closes the door behind him, Tommy whips the mask off, shoving the other on and taking a few shaky breaths. He knows that being electrocuted probably has a lot of side effects, and his body is probably rapidly trying to patch itself up, which is likely why it's all overwhelming all at once.

As he buries his head in his hands, Tommy squeezes his eyes shut and shudders. He wants to go home-he wants to sit on the couch with his knees up by his chest and a cup of hot cocoa in his hand, he wants to joke with Wilbur while they watch some cheesy movie with outdated special effects, he wants to clutch Henry to his chest when Techno puts on a horror movie just to scare him. He doesn't want to be here, sitting and waiting for Tubbo to fix his supersuit while he tries his hardest to recover from being electrocuted.

But that's just it, isn't it? Tommy had wanted to be a hero, and now he is. He has to deal with the responsibility it comes with, and he'll be damned if he's going to sit by while asshats that fancy themselves villains run around with dangerous weapons and malicious motives, terrorizing people and blowing up buildings. That's just not something Tommy's willing to sit by and let happen, not while he's got the power to stop it.

Even trying to find a compromise between the two sides to his life is difficult. Tommy's been tiring himself out just *thinking* about how he could possibly manage both. Not to mention, it's actively fracturing his relationships with the people he cares about. Tommy's never felt

like this before-like half of his brain is commending him on doing the responsible thing and being whatever the people of the city need him to be, while the other half gets shaky at rumbling floorboards, trembles at the idea of Blaze's crazed laugh and 404's sneer.

Tommy's always prided himself on his bravery. And yeah, sometimes it's more unearned confidence and spite than bravery, but Tommy *knows* he's courageous. He stands up for the little guy, protects mum and pop shops, makes sure people get back home safe after he's stopped a robber or knocked out a mugger. Making sure people know that *someone's* out there with the best of intentions is important to him, and Tommy can't leave the city without a protector, not when his appearance as his alter ego had been the catalyst for most of the villains he's still trying to apprehend.

He owes it to the kids at school, his neighbors, his friends, the people of *London* to keep his chin up and fight through it.

"Okay, so I didn't know if you wanted ice or no ice, so I brought one up with ice and one without-are you alright?" Tubbo asks, and Tommy looks up blearily at him. He nods and gestures vaguely to his broken mask, and Tubbo pushes the glasses into Tommy's hands, all no-nonsense as he gets to work. "This should be a quick fix, I just have to replace... ah, shit, that's a little fried too. Doesn't matter, I'll just-hah! There we are!"

Tubbo holds the mask out again, and Tommy takes it, running his thumbs over the fabric and humming. "Thanks," he says, and Tubbo nods. He's gnawing at his bottom lip nervously, and Tommy sets one of the water glasses on the floor to lift his mask slightly and down the one he's still holding. Then, he takes the other and downs that, too. Tubbo takes them and sets them on the desk, politely turning as Tommy switches the masks out again.

"Can I turn around again?" Tubbo asks, and Tommy goes *mhm* as he stands from the bed, swaying a little on the spot. Tubbo reaches out to steady him, and he looks even more concerned now. "D'you... I think you should sit again, Spidey."

"I can't. I have to get home," Tommy says, feeling all hollowed out.

The water had helped. It probably helps his body generate enough energy to fuel his regeneration. That's probably why he's so tired. It's probably fine. Probably. Tommy huffs out a laugh. "Prob-uhb-lee. Such a stupid word, don't you think?"

Blinking at him in confusion, Tubbo shrugs. "I guess...? I don't know. Are you sure you can make it home? You can stay and rest if your house is too far," he offers, and Tommy waves dismissively; he doesn't want to be an inconvenience, and he *can* get home once he snaps himself out of... whatever this is. "I can sleep on the couch if your identity's what your worried about, I swear I wouldn't-"

"I know you wouldn't," Tommy cuts in easily, because he does, and Tubbo is a wonderful, wonderful friend. Tommy closes his eyes. "I'm very tired, Tubbo."

"I can only imagine," Tubbo chuckles nervously. Tommy shuffles over to the still-open window and swings his legs out. Tubbo gently places his hand on Tommy's shoulder, and Tommy feels a little guilty for making Tubbo so concerned. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Things have been hard for me these past couple months, man. I don't really know what to do about it," Tommy says, and Tubbo goes through what looks like forty different emotions all in one second. Tommy tilts his head. "Are *you* okay? You look as if you've just had a stroke."

Swallowing, Tubbo shakes his head. "No, sorry, I just-you sounded so much like Tommy for a minute there," he says, voice shaky, and Tommy just blinks slowly at him. He's too tired. He's *so* tired. He wants to go to bed. "You, uh... you should talk to someone. I should've told him that too, but I made a stupid joke-doesn't matter. Tell somebody about it. Doesn't have to be me, of course, don't get me wrong, I... I just think you oughta talk to someone."

Tommy smiles softly, even though Tubbo can't see. "I make no promises," he jokes weakly, and Tubbo looks like he wants to say something else, but he hesitates. "I'll be fine. Don't worry about me, okay? I've got... people."

He *does*, technically speaking. He could talk to Techno or Tubbo. That's more than one person, so it counts. Tommy's not going to talk to Tubbo, of course, the last thing Tubbo needs is superhero baggage on top of all the other things he's got to deal with, and Techno's not the most emotionally available hammer in the toolshed.

"Wait here," Tubbo says, and he dashes out of his room, leaving Tommy to wonder what the hell that's all about. He's left in the windowsill, and while he's not about to just ditch Tubbo, Tommy *is* a little tempted to just up and go home. Thankfully, it's only a minute or two before Tubbo rushes back into the room, pressing a tiny object into Tommy's hands. "Here! You can pin it to your hoodie. Oh, and let me get you your gas mask before you go!"

As Tubbo goes to the closet, presumably to grab the mask, Tommy looks down at his hand, breath hitching. It's a little bee pin, worn from old age, and Tommy knows for a fact that Tubbo's dad had given it to Puffy to give to Tubbo before he left for the Peace Corps. "Tubbo, I couldn't possibly take it, I..." Tommy trails off, not sure how to explain how he knows just how much the pin means to Tubbo. "It looks really sentimental, I-I don't want to overstep."

"Nonsense," Tubbo says, playfully swatting Tommy with the gas mask and making sure it's securely fastened around Tommy's neck. His expression softens, and he smiles in a gentle kind of way that makes Tommy's stomach churn with guilt. "It's just... a reminder that you've got somebody, no matter how far away they are."

"Thank you," Tommy says in a choked voice, and he clears his throat. "I should... I gotta get going. Thanks again. For everything."

"It's my honor, bossman," Tubbo says, beaming, and Tommy pulls him into a tight hug. Tubbo laughs after a good few moments and shoves him away lightly. "You're crushing me! Now get out of my room before my aunt comes to say goodnight."

"You got it," Tommy says, giving Tubbo a two-fingered salute as he swings out above the neighborhood and towards his own house.

And when Tommy turns the little bee pin over in his fingers later that

night, his hands aren't shaking.

I hope you all enjoyed reading about the carnival as much as I enjoyed writing it! Also, I love reading y'all's theories, it's so much fun :D

cain complex

Chapter 22: cain complex

Brotherly insecurities come to a head when Techno's fight training goes a little awry.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Now, if you were to ask Tommy what he'd expected to find when he'd entered the living room, his answer would have been something mundane. Perhaps Phil, having a cup of tea. Maybe Kristin, crocheting a new sweater for one of them. Hell, even Wilbur playing the guitar, or Techno testing out one of his many, many swords on various fruits.

Tommy had not, in fact, expected to see Wilbur half-dangling out of the window, a plume of smoke coming from the lit cigarette in his hand.

As the door swings shut behind him, Wilbur jumps, bumping his head on the top of the frame, and Tommy stifles a laugh as he scrambles to put the cigarette out on the side of the house and duck back in. "Tommy! You're home early," he says, shutting the window and smoothing down his hair, and he grins nervously.

"That I am," Tommy says, brows raised, and Wilbur sighs, eyes closed. Truth be told, he'd been planning on staying out on patrol for a good while longer, but Tubbo had pointed out that he'd been really shaky whenever he'd stood on top of a building, which really won't do if he's going to be saving people. "And *you* are smoking in the living room."

Grimacing, Wilbur runs a hand through his curls, which undoes the

smoothing-down he'd just done, and it sticks up in all directions. Tommy sets his duffel bag down to cross his arms. "I don't smoke *often*, y'know? I just... it's a stress reliever," he says, and Tommy frowns. He wonders just how many cigarettes he'd had between their rooftop conversation and now. Wilbur scans Tommy's face and gives him a pleading look. "Just... don't tell Phil and Kristin, alright?"

Tommy sighs, but he nods anyway. "Fine, but you owe me," he says, and Wilbur rolls his eyes, shoving Tommy's head lightly as he makes his way past and into the kitchen. The stench of cigarette smoke fills Tommy's nose, and he scrunches his face up. "God, you smell gross, Wil."

"Comes with the territory," Wilbur answers easily from the kitchen, and Tommy grabs his duffel bag again, ready to head upstairs when Wilbur steps back out, two mugs of coffee in hand. "Oh, are you heading up already? I was gonna-I mean, that's fine, I just. Y'know."

Ah, right.

Things are still a bit tense. After their conversation in Wilbur's car, Tommy's found it easier to talk with him, but it's still weirdly awkward whenever they do talk, especially if Tommy's been hanging out with Techno. "Oh, um, I can-yeah, no, I could use some coffee," Tommy says, half-smiling, and Wilbur's shoulders drop in relief. They sit down across from one another in the living room, and Tommy keeps his duffel bag by his feet. "So... how's work?"

It's a stupid question, but it makes Wilbur laugh. Tommy counts that as a win. He sips on his coffee, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Quackity's been having a shitload of staff meetings, something about getting us all accustomed to the new dynamic, but other than that, it's been nice," Wilbur says. He smiles softly and leans back into the couch, and Tommy takes another sip of coffee. It's actually pretty decent; Wilbur always forgets to put enough sugar in his, but that's not exactly a problem anymore.

Not that caffeine can really do anything now that Tommy's got his crazy metabolism, but he quite likes the taste. "Big Q's really cool. The other day, I ran into him in the hallway and we had this whole conversation about this game I've been getting into," Tommy says,

and Wilbur makes a barely-concealed face of annoyance. Okay, so maybe bringing up Quackity hadn't been the smartest move. But Tommy can still salvage this! "Anyway, Tubbo told me the other day about how his chemistry class has been up to their necks in labs n' shit, glad I'm taking bio instead."

Wilbur chuckles, and Tommy can still smell cigarette smoke. "Bio's much better. Y'know, Sam was telling me earlier today about how well you're doing in his programming class," he says, looking quite proud, and Tommy tries to smother his inevitable grin. Wilbur's *proud* of him. Wilbur tilts his mug. "Also, don't tell your friends, but I'm grading the essays from your class period, and you've all done great. Well done, Toms."

"Thanks, Wil," Tommy says quietly, a soft smile on his face in spite of his best efforts to appear as though he couldn't care less. They sit in a peaceful silence for a while, sipping on their respective mugs of coffee; Wilbur's has a little blue sheep on it, and he'd given Tommy the infamous raccoon mug, though Tommy doesn't have it in him to protest. Tommy clears his throat. "Um, listen, I wanted to—"

"I *thought* I heard you in here, gremlin," Techno says from the doorway, and Tommy glances at him. The Sense hadn't warned him, but Tommy's pretty sure The Sense thinks it's funny as fuck when Techno catches him off guard, and The Sense is a little bitch like that sometimes. Techno eyes his duffel bag warily, then nods in greeting at Wilbur, whose smile doesn't meet his eyes. Techno turns to look at Tommy, leaning against the doorframe. "We can get a headstart on stuff since you're back so soon. Might finally be able to teach you how to block properly, too."

Tommy brightens up at that. Techno's fighting lessons have actually been really helpful; he's come home with less bruises and cuts now that he knows a better technique. "Yeah! I'll be there in just a second, Tech, lemme put my shit in my room," he says, gathering his things and starting to head upstairs.

He drops his duffel in the closet and changes out of his sweatshirt into a shirt that's easier to breathe in. His joggers should be fine; it's getting colder out, so training in shorts has gotten kind of bothersome. As he makes his way to the backyard, Tommy's slightly

surprised to find Wilbur sitting in one of the patio chairs, a replenished mug of coffee in hand. Glancing over to Techno for an explanation, he's met with a helpless shrug.

"I figured I'd sit in and see what you two have been up to," Wilbur says easily, and Techno rolls his eyes as he sets up their usual equipment. Tommy squares his shoulders, stretching out his arms so that Techno doesn't scold him about it again. Honestly, Tommy finds it a little stupid to waste time on stretching; it's not as though he'll have time to do that before he fights criminals. He's snapped out of his concentration as Wilbur chokes on his coffee. "That's a shitload of protective gear, Tech."

"Tommy packs a hell of a punch," Techno says, and Tommy grins as he cracks his knuckles. It's not *technically* a lie. Tommy still holds back his usual amount of strength, and he *had* been the one to insist that Techno wear something to protect himself, just in case, but he doesn't actively try to punch hard no matter what Techno tells him. "Alright, kid, do your leg stretches and then we'll get into it."

Tommy gives him a salute and starts to stretch his legs, which has been a *significantly* easier activity since his powers have supplied him with increased agility; Tommy used to dread toe touches, but now they're a fucking breeze. As he rolls up his sleeves to his shoulders, Wilbur chokes again behind him. Tommy gives him an annoyed look.

"Sorry, shit, I just-Tommy, since *when* have your arms looked like that?!" Wilbur demands, and Tommy glances down at himself. Yeah, his arms are less noodly, but it's not like he's got biceps like Techno or Sally, even *with* superpowered muscles.

"He's still built like a spaghetti noodle at best, he hasn't suddenly turned into The Rock while you weren't lookin', Wilbur," Techno says, and Tommy flips him off, making a point to strain his muscles slightly so that they flex. Techno rolls his eyes and gets into his usual defensive position. "Alright, show me what you remember from last time."

Tommy swings out a punch, careful to keep form and throw his weight into it. *Follow through* had been Techno's main point from

their last little training session, but Tommy's still hesitant to do it. He doesn't want to accidentally *maim* someone. Techno nods approvingly, and Tommy swings out a kick, then another punch, then a roundhouse. That one had been particularly tricky to get down, but it's been so useful.

He's been asking Techno to teach him how to flip into it, so he looks *extra* cool while fighting, but Techno has adamantly refused every time. "Hah! Fuck you, bitch!" Tommy cheers as his next kick knocks Techno back a little, even while he's restraining his strength. Another two punches, then a jab with his elbow, then a right hook.

The pattern's easy enough to follow, which Tommy appreciates. He can't exactly try out different combos when he's fighting in the streets of London. Techno nods once, and Tommy falls back; they've begun to have a sort of wordless code as they're training, which comes in handy when Tommy's in the zone and shutting out any distractions. His quips can be saved for when he's *not* learning how to properly fight.

"Nice work," Techno says, and Tommy beams, basking in the praise. Techno moves to start rearranging Tommy's position—he kicks lightly to move Tommy's right leg back, and Tommy falls back into a defensive stance, just like Techno wants. "Put your arms up like you're about to punch. Good. Now move your fists closer—no, Tommy, not by your shoulders—there you go. And keep your balance on your rear foot, don't fall back, but use it to ground yourself."

"Right, right, and am I—does my knee placement look okay? My center of gravity or whatever the fuck isn't off?" Tommy asks, and Techno nods in approval, moving to adjust Tommy's elbows so that they point out slightly while keeping his fists close to his face. "Okay, now what the hell am I meant to do?"

Techno throws an elbow toward his face and Tommy catches it easily. "No, *block it*. You catch someone's arm with both hands like that, you risk them usin' the other to take you down," he scolds, and Tommy groans. It'd been a reflex! But, he supposes, that's kind of the point of this training; he's got to make proper fighting techniques and stances replace his current reflexes. Techno moves to stand in front of him, and Tommy tries his best to keep his stance. "Show me

how *you* think blockin' should look, and I'll correct you."

Wilbur clears his throat from the patio, and the two of them turn to give him an annoyed look. If you ask Tommy, Wilbur's more than welcome to sit in, but he shouldn't go interrupting Techno's lessons. "Why exactly are we teaching the child how to fight?" he asks, and Tommy blinks. That's actually a pretty fair question to have.

"He asked," is all that Techno says as an explanation, their agreed-upon excuse, and he throws a punch at Tommy, who throws up his arm in front of his face to block it. Techno grins. "Much better, Tommy! Keep your elbows lower than your fists, that's it, you got it."

He throws another, and Tommy blocks it, making sure to follow Techno's advice. "Can't get me, bitch, I'm too fast," Tommy jokes as he blocks a high kick, and Techno counters with another punch, still smiling easily at him.

The hits start coming a little bit faster, and Techno only has to correct him once or twice, and Tommy starts getting in the zone. Training with Techno is always so nice-Tommy barely has to think, and Techno always looks so quietly proud after they're done. Techno's not holding back, but Tommy's got this, it's so much easier to block hits now that he knows how to do it.

"For fuck's sakes, be careful!" Wilbur calls out, very nervously, and Tommy snaps out of his concentration at the sound of it. Techno's fist connects with his nose. Stumbling back, Tommy clutches at his face, eyes squeezed shut as they prick with tears. *Christ*, that hurts. Techno's by his side in a second, moving Tommy's hands away from his face and inspecting the damage. Wilbur rushes over too, and Tommy glares at him. "Techno, I *just* told you to be careful!"

"*You* distracted him," Techno shoots back, eyes narrowed, and Tommy squirms out of his grip as he rubs at the bridge of his nose. It doesn't *feel* broken, but that might just be the adrenaline. If it is, they'll have to set it before his accelerated regeneration keeps it in place. Techno moves in front of Wilbur and swats Tommy's hands down again, tilting his head slightly as he sighs. "You *are* bleedin', but it's not broken. C'mon, let's get you some ice."

Tommy follows him in, and Wilbur trails behind them, still clearly buzzing with worry. “I *knew* that wasn’t going to end well, I fucking *knew* it, now you’re *bleeding*,” he frets, and Tommy rolls his eyes. A little bruising isn’t going to kill him, it’s not as though Techno’s shot him or something, but Wilbur still glares daggers at Techno like he had. “How could you be so careless?!”

Scowling, Techno gestures for Tommy to hop up on the counter, and he digs in the freezer for an ice pack. “Oh, I’m careless? What did you think yellin’ ‘be careful’ would even *do*, Wil? He was focused, he *stays* focused if he’s not distracted,” Techno shoots back, carefully placing the ice pack over Tommy’s nose, and Tommy takes it gratefully. Wilbur hovers. It’s vaguely annoying, but Tommy’s not about to tell him off—he’s more focused on the throbbing pain in his nose.

“Why the hell are you even teaching a teenager how to fight?!” Wilbur demands, and as Techno goes to obviously restate what he’d said earlier, Wilbur glares at him. “No, I don’t give a shit if he asked, not only are you teaching a child to fight, but you’re not a professional, Techno! He could get hurt, or he could break a bone, or—”

“*He* is right here,” Tommy cuts in, and Wilbur sighs in frustration. “It’s *fine*, Wil. Techno’s a really good teacher, I’m getting much better at it. Shit just comes with the territory, Big Dubs.”

Wilbur gestures wildly, clearly stressed out. “It’s decidedly *not* fine, Tommy, you shouldn’t be—he shouldn’t teach you how to fight, you don’t need to know! I don’t want to hear it, Techno, even if he asked, you should know better!” he says, and Tommy feels rather patronized. He can hold his own, and Wilbur’s got no clue what he’s actually talking about.

Phil comes into the kitchen, brows furrowed with concern. “I heard arguing from the home office, what’s going on?” he asks, looking to Techno and Wilbur for an explanation, but when his eyes land on Tommy, they go wide. “Oh my God, what happened to your nose, mate?!”

“Techno’s teaching Tommy how to fight, and he ended up punching

Tommy in the face,” Wilbur snitches, and Tommy squirms as Phil moves the ice pack down to inspect the damage. The swelling has probably gone down significantly, but he knows he’s still bleeding.

Techno groans. “It’s not *like that*, Wilbur was the one who distracted Tommy, I was teachin’ him how to block properly,” he explains, but Phil’s fretting doesn’t stop. Techno nudges Phil out of the way and puts the ice pack back in place, patting Tommy’s knee. “Just keep it in place, we’ll get the blood cleaned up in a bit after the swelling’s gone completely.”

Almost comically worried, Wilbur puts his hands on his hips. “His nose is swollen! How many times has he been injured before this?!” he asks, and Phil puts a hand on his arm. Wilbur points an accusatory finger at Techno, who rolls his eyes. “Have you been hiding his injuries from us?!”

“Wil, I’m *fine*, he’s teaching me, I’m doing good! This is the first time something like this has even happened, you’re overreacting,” Tommy interjects, and Phil shakes his head in clear disbelief, one hand massaging at the spot where his brows furrow. “Seriously, it’s fine, I keep telling you, Techno’s a good teacher!”

“He’s not a professional, as skilled as he may be, and safety is the most important aspect of learning hand-to-hand combat. That’s one of the first things they teach you,” Phil says calmly, and Wilbur gestures to him vigorously, as if Phil’s opinion somehow justifies his tantrum. Tommy groans and tilts his head up at the ceiling in annoyance, only to have it gently guided back down by Techno.

“Don’t tilt your head up when you have a nosebleed,” he says, and that’s as close to scolding as Techno ever gets, so Tommy listens. Techno turns back to Phil and Wilbur, arms crossed. “I *know* safety’s important, Phil. I’m takin’ every precaution recommended, I swear. And we can’t give Tommy professional lessons because his schedule’s a little hectic right now, so-”

Wilbur cuts him off with a scoff. “Oh, and what the fuck do *you* know about his schedule, why the hell are you speaking for him?!” he says, and Tommy’s of the opinion that *everybody’s* been speaking for him, thank you very much. “Tommy barely talked to you two

months ago, how the hell would *you* know-”

“I know because I *listen* to him, *Wilbur*, maybe if *you* did, you’d get your nose out of places where it doesn’t belong-”

“Oh, *fuck you*, Techno, am I not allowed to be worried when someone who should know better than to teach a kid to fight decides on a whim that it’s perfectly acceptable for *my* little brother to-”

“He’s *my* kid brother too, jackass! And you don’t know *anything* about what’s goin’ on with him right now, don’t act all holier than thou when you’re just compensating for treatin’ him like he’s not even there-”

“I’m not treating him like-! You know what, fuck off, of *course* I know what’s going on with him, I was there at the robbery! You’re the one who’s got no clue-”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I wasn’t aware that *being present* while somethin’ traumatic happens to him excuses all the other things you’ve done,” Techno snarls, and Tommy tries his hardest to blend in with the counter he’s sitting on. He looks towards Phil for assistance, solidarity, *anything*, but Phil’s just watching helplessly as Techno shoves Wilbur’s shoulder. “Let me think, if I’m in your shoes, what would I do? I certainly wouldn’t mess with his anxiety by handin’ him his test like he’s failed! And I definitely wouldn’t *steal food* from his lunch when he’s just started to eat normally again!”

“It was habit, and I thought it was *your* lunch I took it from! He’s gone back to normal, I’m not gonna sit there and handle him with fucking *kid gloves*, he hates that, and if you knew him at all, *you’d* know that! I don’t want him to feel pitied!” Wilbur says, shoving at Techno in return, and Tommy’s hands start to get shaky again. All this yelling is *scarily* reminiscent of hearing Blaze and 404 argue in that burning building. “But you don’t know him at all, because you’ve never made the fucking *effort!*”

Techno’s posture gets defensive-defensive in the real way, the kind of way he’ll slip into if Tommy kicks too hard, or if he’s seen some moron on the news or on Twitter shitting on how Spider-Man’s handled the latest crisis. Tommy hops off of the counter and steps

between them, one hand on Techno's arm. "Tech, he doesn't mean it, he's just worried right now, don't-you don't have to defend yourself, of course you've made an effort," he says, and confusion mixes into the anger on Wilbur's face.

To Tommy's dismay, Techno just shakes his head and steps closer to Wilbur. "No, you don't get to say that, you have no *idea* what Tommy's been through, and for you to throw that in *my* face 'cuz you're not gettin' your way-

"Oh, *I'm* not getting my way, am I?! Phil seems to disagree, which trumps whatever shitty argument you're trying to cobble together," Wilbur sneers, and Phil looks very uncomfortable suddenly. Tommy's just glad the attention has somewhat shifted off of him. Then Wilbur turns to Tommy. Nevermind on the attention shift, then. Damn. "Why the hell are you standing up for him, as if you haven't spent *nights* in my room asking me why he's never tried to get to know you, as if I haven't watched you *cry* because of him *estranging* himself from you-

"I haven't! I'm not-Wilbur, stop, that's not true, I-!" Tommy cuts himself off in frustration, and he runs the hand not holding the ice pack to his face through his hair.

"No, I know what it is, you're too *afraid* to call him out on it, aren't you?! You're worried if he knew how you really felt, he'd stop being all fuckin' buddy-buddy with you! Worried he'll ditch your birthday again for fencing, I fucking bet that's what it is-

"That was *one time*, and it was because I was in a different *country*," Techno says heatedly, and Tommy's shoulders find their way to his ears. Phil pulls Tommy to his side and starts to say something, but Techno starts to laugh mirthlessly. "And how many things have *you* missed?! I'm the only one who actually, *really* talks to the kid right now, don't act like you fixed everything because you took him bowlin' and make small talk whenever things feel just a *little* too tense! If anyone's a bad brother here, it's *you!*"

"That's enough!" Phil bellows, and Techno and Wilbur both fall silent, leaning away from each other, chests heaving with angry breaths and eyes still locked in some weird standoff. Tommy shrinks

back. "Both of you, cut the bullshit and stop arguing over your brother when he's standing in the room! Christ, Toms, I'm sorry."

Tommy shrugs. He just wants to leave the kitchen. Phil hands him a dishtowel, and Tommy wipes away the blood under his nose. "It's fine," he mumbles, even if his throat feels tight and his lungs are burning at his effort to keep his breathing steady.

Phil shakes his head. "It's *not* fine. You two are grown men, start acting like it. I'm gonna take Tommy to grab some food, and I *expect* you to have resolved this issue by the time we get back," he says firmly, and Techno and Wilbur have the good sense to look a little sheepish at that. Phil puts an arm around Tommy and shepherds him out of the room, lips in a thin, tense line. When they're out in the hall, Phil stands back and smiles gently. "C'mon, mate, I'll get you whatever you want, God knows you've earned it. And I can't, in good faith, endorse Techno's 'lessons,' but... I'm sure we can work something out."

Tommy nods and slips his shoes on, as does Phil, and he follows him out to the car, trying to ignore the way he can still hear Wilbur and Techno's raised voices. Phil doesn't seem to, though, so Tommy just assumes it's his enhanced hearing putting him through more bullshit. As he slips into the passenger seat, Phil starts up the car and drums his fingers on the wheel.

"Can we just get fast food? I'm not in the mood to sit down at a restaurant," Tommy says quietly, and Phil nods as he pulls out of the driveway. Tommy slumps a little in his seat, fidgeting with his sleeves so that they roll back down properly. "That was kind of my fault back there. Sorry they started arguing."

Phil's brow furrows, and he shakes his head. "No, Toms, that's not—you're not at fault there, they were both being dickheads. You *happening* to spend more time with one of your brothers isn't something they should be having a screaming match over, they're just being immature," he says easily, and Tommy feels a little comforted by that. "Wil's just jealous, he'll get over himself soon enough, don't worry."

Tommy snorts. "Nothin' to be jealous over, honestly," he says, and

it's true. The time he spends with Techno is either getting patched up, tutored, or trained. Wilbur would hate doing any of that stuff.

Chuckling softly, Phil pulls into the drive-thru of the nearest burger joint, and Tommy beams; he's always up for a burger. Something seems to be bugging Phil, though, and as they move up the slow line, he sighs. "Tommy, is there something I should know?" he asks, and Tommy feigns confusion. Phil's brows are pinched together. "Is there something going on with you, mate? I know you took care of whatever had been bothering you before, and you've seemed much less stressed recently, but I've got this... feeling that there's something wrong, and I don't have a fucking clue if it's just me being paranoid."

"No, no, you're not, I... I just don't know who to talk to, and I'm scared that if I do, they'll... they won't look at me like I'm *me*," Tommy answers honestly, and it feels *so good* to tell someone that.

He doesn't want to talk to anyone-not about the weird way his pulse quickens and his lungs struggle to keep up with him hyperventilating out of nowhere sometimes, not about the way his hands still shake when he walks by a ten-story brick building, not about how being the only one to know about certain aspects of London's world of crime occasionally makes him feel as though his chest is being pressed down by a massive block of concrete. They'd look at him with pity he doesn't want, handle him like glass, call his bouts of slight, *harmless* anxiety 'panic attacks' and force him to tell them when it had started, where it had come from.

And he can't handle that. *Tommy* is loud, confident, brave, unafraid even when it's detrimental, and whoever he is right now doesn't feel exactly like himself. It's uncomfortable and terrifying in a way that makes Tommy nauseous when he looks at himself in the mirror for more than a minute, and he can't even begin to explain the feeling he gets when he stands at the grill for too long and catches a whiff of smoke that smells just a little *too* familiar.

So how is he supposed to look Phil in the eyes and spill his guts? How's he meant to tell his dad that he's putting himself in constant danger, that he's the real source of tension in their family, or that the reason he jumps and startles so easily isn't because someone's

caught him off guard, it's because he's so used to The Sense warning him he's about to be shot or stabbed now that he instinctively assumes that's what's coming when it happens with little things?

Tommy barely registers Phil ordering for the both of them. "Toms? You've been quiet for a while there, bud," Phil says gently, and Tommy hums in question, then straightens up. "You're afraid if you talk to us about your problems, we won't look at you the same? Is that it?"

"Yeah," Tommy says, because if he were to tell anyone else that he's Spider-Man, they *would* look at him differently. "But don't worry about it too much, Phil, I've got it handled."

"It's my *job* to worry about it," Phil says as they pull up to the first window, and he hands the cashier his card. "I joke about you lot giving me grey hairs with all the trouble you cause, but that's not me saying I don't want to be there for you when you've *got* troubles."

Smiling sadly, Tommy nods. "I know," he says, and he does, Phil's a good dad, he tries *so* hard, and Tommy's just making him worried over nothing. "I'll be alright. It's just a bunch of shitty stuff making me stressed, I'll get through it."

Phil returns his sad smile as the cashier hands his card back, and they pull up to the next window to wait for their food. "... Is my cooking bad?" Phil asks, immediately breaking the tension, and Tommy bursts out laughing, shoulders shaking. Phil's grinning now. "Oh, fuck off, it's not, is it?"

"Phil, it's *so bad*," Tommy says through his laughter, and Phil sighs. "I'm telling you, man, just let Wil or Kristin cook, they actually make shit taste like what it's supposed to. Spices n' shit, Big P, I mean seriously."

"I always forget! And nobody says anything," Phil says with a laugh, and Tommy makes an *eh* sort of gesture with his hand. Phil shakes his head. "You fuckers are just eating it to spare my feelings, I can't *believe* this."

Tommy gives his shoulder a pat as the worker hands them their bag of food. "Nobody wants to stress you out, Phil, lest your heart gives in and you... y'know," Tommy says, absolutely delighted at the flat look of unamusement he gets in return, and Phil shoves the bag at him while he looks for a place to park. "Right then, old man, let's see... chicken sandwich is for you, I'm hoping, and-! I owe my life to you, there's three burgers in here, Phil, I would die for you."

"Christ, mate, it's just a few burgers, no need to lay your life on the line," Phil jokes, reaching over to grab a few chips as he pulls into a spot, and Tommy shoves the burger in his face. God, that really never gets old. Phil takes his sandwich and hums pleasantly as he has a bite. "That's pretty decent, actually, didn't expect it to taste this good."

Nodding, Tommy chomps on his burger some more. "Tech takes me here sometimes after I've had a shit day, they make really fuckin' good burgers," he says, adding some chips to his next bite of burger, and Phil makes a face at just how much food Tommy's got in his face all at once. He's been told it can be an intimidating sight.

They enjoy their food in peaceful silence, and as Phil finishes off his chicken sandwich and Tommy finishes his second burger, Phil turns on the radio. It's at a quiet volume, but it's a nice little pop song. Tommy hums along, and Phil joins in at the second chorus.

"How long d'you think it'll be until they're holding forks to each other's throats?" Phil asks as the song fades out, and Tommy snorts.

"I give 'em five more minutes," Tommy says easily, and Phil raises a brow.

"I say two."

Techno and Wilbur are just projecting their insecurities onto one another, and poor Tommy's caught in the crossfire. Also, Phil is a

Good Dad and I will die by that fact.

detrimental experiments

Chapter 23: detrimental experiments

After snapping at Techno and Wilbur, Tommy goes to investigate a very familiar place.

TW for slight body horror in this chapter!!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Honestly, Tommy's got no fucking time to deal with Wilbur and Techno right now.

He's got Boss, Blaze, *and* 404 on his radar now, he's not going to waste any unnecessary time on entertaining their clear attempts at becoming the favorite. It had started out kind of funny, with the two of them scrambling-in their own way-to prove that they're a better brother, but now? It's just a pain in Tommy's ass.

This is the third day in a row that Wilbur has tried to bribe him with promises of laser tag, arcade games, and going to see whatever movie Tommy wants. "If you want to have a very *brotherly* chat afterwards, that would be perfectly okay with me, Tommy," Wilbur says, and Tommy idly notes that he smells *strongly* of cigarettes. Techno scoffs from his spot on the couch, and Tommy just wants to fucking leave already so he can patrol. Wilbur puts a hand over his chest, the melodramatic bastard he is. "Because unlike *some* people, I am an emotionally intelligent, mature, and competent adult willing to assist my little brother with whatever problems he may or

may not be facing.”

Tommy blinks. “That’s great, Wilbur. Cheers,” he says flatly, and he turns towards the door, only to be stopped by Techno, who crosses the room in, like, three seconds. Tommy glares up at him; if there’s *anyone* who knows exactly why Tommy’s heading out, it’s him.

“What do you want, prick?”

“I can teach you how to wield a sword,” Techno says, and Tommy’s gotta admit, it’s more tempting than his previous propositions of pushing Tommy on their old swingset in the backyard. When Tommy had pointed out that he hadn’t been on those swings since he was nine, Techno had gone red and promptly changed the subject.

“I’m good, but thanks anyway,” Tommy says flatly. Techno huffs slightly in annoyance, but Tommy pays him no mind. He’s got patrol to get to, after all.

“Are you *sure* you don’t want to go with me to the arcade? I’ve got an all-access pass with your name on it, Toms,” Wilbur offers, waving his wallet, and Tommy’s tempted to both laugh *and* groan. “Plus, I can take you to that sweets shop down the street afterwards-”

“He doesn’t *like* sweet things, Wil. I’ll take you to a steakhouse,” Techno cuts in, and now both of his brothers are in the front hall with him, moving in front of him and blocking the goddamn door. “And I can take you to that trampoline place before we eat.”

Wilbur rolls his eyes. “Dumbass, he broke his wrist there when he was eleven, that’s why he never went there again,” he snaps, and Techno glares at him. Tommy is suddenly *very* uncomfortable with the energy in the room now. “Tommy, you should hang out with me, I know what you *actually* like to do.”

A sarcastic laugh from Techno makes Wilbur’s face flush with either anger, embarrassment, or a mix of the two. Tommy hates this. “He’s got no clue what he’s talkin’ about,” Techno says easily, and Tommy wants to *scream*. “I’m the one who knows what’s goin’ on with you, you can trust me, Tommy.”

"No he can't, you barely know anything about him-"

"There you go, speakin' for him again even though that annoys the hell out of the kid-"

"Oh, and you having said that just now doesn't count as 'speaking for him,' then?! Fucking bastard, you've no idea what you're on about, you weren't there-"

"What wasn't I there for, Wilbur?! Go on, say it with your chest, say it like you mean it-"

"I fuckin' *will*, if you'd just let me speak! You weren't there for him his whole life, he doesn't need you now-"

"So he needs *you*?! What, do you think he's not old enough to decide who to confide in for himself or somethin'?!"

"That's not what I said, you're putting words in my mouth, you dickhead-"

"I'd like to put my *fist* in your face, you-"

"Both of you, shut the fuck up!" Tommy shouts, hands shaking at his sides and chest heaving. Wilbur and Techno freeze in their bickering. They look at him with wide eyes, like they haven't got a goddamned clue why he's so upset, like they're just so innocent. It makes Tommy absolutely fucking *furios*. "I've had enough of this shit!"

Wilbur's face falls. "Tommy-"

"No! No, Wil, you're gonna fucking listen to me for *once*, I swear to God," Tommy says as his fingers curl into fists. "You're both acting like fucking *toddlers*! I'm tired of you smothering me because you feel guilty over some bullshit you have no control over and having it spiral into stupid fights every damn time you talk! No, Techno, you *weren't* there. Wilbur's right, you missed out on a huge chunk of my childhood because you didn't like spending time with me for whatever fucking reason, and all you *do* remember about me is outdated shit from before I was eight! That doesn't just go away because we're reconnecting! And before *you* get fuckin' smug,

Wilbur, Techno's right, too! You have *no* idea what's going on with me right now, and you just want to feel as though nothing's changed, but it *has*, and that's not your fault! It's not something you can control, so stop fucking trying to! And stop assuming that I'm pissed at you because I go to someone else to confide in for *once*! Techno, you know *exactly* how shit things are right now, you're just piling more shit on, whether you mean to or not! And Wilbur, you *don't* know, so stop acting all high and mighty and get over yourself! *Neither of you are being good brothers!* So get your shit together and fucking *talk* to each other so that *I* don't have to deal with your goddamn tantrums!"

Tommy pants, shoulders up by his ears by now, and Techno and Wilbur are just standing there, *staring* at him like *he's* the one out of line, like *he's* the one throwing a tantrum, and it's fucking infuriating. "Everything okay out here?" Phil asks softly from behind them, and Tommy whirls around, still scowling. Phil's brows furrow, and he puts a hand on Tommy's shoulder, only for it to be shrugged off. "What's going on, mate?"

"I'm going to my room," Tommy mumbles, still scowling, and he pushes past Phil to go upstairs and slam his door behind him. He'll just sneak out of the fucking window, he wants no part of this weird back-and-forth pissing contest. If you ask Tommy, his brothers are fucking stupid, and they're just being dicks to each other. As Tommy starts to unzip his duffel bag to grab his suit and get changed so that he can finally go on patrol, there's a knock on his door. "What the fuck d'you want?!"

Phil opens the door slowly, and Tommy zips his bag back up. "Hey," he says gently, and if Wilbur had been right about one thing, it's that Tommy is *tired* of being handled with kiddie gloves. "I just wanted to pop in and check on you. That was a lot of anger back there."

Scoffing, Tommy starts making his bed, just to give his hands something to do with all this nervous, rage-induced energy. "Yeah, no shit it was a lot of anger," Tommy says, "I'm fuckin' pissed off, Phil."

"I can see that," Phil says, sounding a little amused as Tommy puts Henry down in front of his pillows a little more forcefully than he'd

normally do it. He's more delicate with Clementine; he shouldn't take his anger out on some stupid stuffed animals. Phil walks over and sits down on the bed, patting the spot next to him. Tommy is vaguely annoyed; he'd *just* straightened that sheet out. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Tommy sits down. It can't hurt to complain for a few minutes before he goes to patrol. "They're being fuckin' *stupid*, man," he huffs, and Phil nods, smiling sadly. "I mean, they're both right, but they couldn't be more obtuse about it! How the hell is that even-why the fuck are they still arguing about it?! It's been *days*, Phil. Days."

Phil nods, arms crossed. "I think it has less to do with you than it has to do with them being insecure, if that helps," he says, and it does. Just a little. Phil's brows furrow, and he leans his elbows on his knees, fingers threaded together. "They shouldn't have put you in the middle of everything. I'm sorry, Toms. I'll do better to make sure they don't drag you into it."

"It's whatever, I just want it to stop," Tommy mumbles, rubbing at his eyes with the heels of his palms. "I've got enough shit to deal with without them yelling at each other over things that don't fucking matter in the long run. Techno's apparently struggling with the fact that I'm not nine fucking years old anymore, and Wilbur's throwing a fit because I didn't tell him about something. The fuck am I meant to do here?!"

"I think they're just not used to it yet," Phil says, and Tommy's brow furrows. What the fuck does *that* mean? Phil hums and drops his hands to rest in his lap, still clasped together. "Well, you and Wilbur have always been close, it's natural that he'd freak out a bit when that changes. He sees you getting close with Tech, and it scares him, because he thinks he's not going to have the same role in your life anymore. You've always looked up to Techno too, which adds another layer of 'oh shit' for him. And with Techno, well... he doesn't like to be told that he's failed. And when Wilbur lashed out and pointed out that he's not exactly been... the warmest towards you, Techno got a little *too* defensive about it. They both love you, they just don't know how to deal with the fact that they make mistakes, the damn perfectionists that they are."

Tommy stays quiet for a moment; now that Phil's put it into words, the seemingly pointless argument starts to make a lot of sense. Of course Techno and Wilbur are too stupid to realize that they're both good brothers. "What about you?" Tommy asks, and Phil hums in question. Tommy fiddles with the hem of his shirt and looks away. "Are you used to it?"

"I'm used to a lot of things," Phil says, annoyingly vague, and Tommy gives him a flat look. Phil knows what he means, he's just being a prick. Chuckling, Phil pats his hand. "I'm used to Wilbur writing songs in the music room at ass o' clock in the morning, for one thing. I'm also used to Techno locking himself in his room to study to the point of concern. I'm used to you sneaking out and thinking I don't know about it."

The last bit is said with a playful punch to Tommy's arm, and he goes flush with embarrassment. So maybe he's not as stealthy as he'd thought. "Fuck off, old man, you know what I meant," he says, and Phil smiles.

"I'm not used to it, but I've not got much of an issue with change. I'm glad you and Techno are finally getting closer," he admits, and Tommy snorts. That's one way of wording it. "I'm also kind of relieved. Techno has a hard time admitting that he cares, especially when he cares so much. Maybe this'll teach him and Wil to be a little less emotionally constipated."

"Yeah," Tommy says with a small smile, "maybe."

"Bossman, you will not believe the day I've had," Tubbo says as soon as Tommy's suit activates in the alley, and Tommy quickly propels himself up over the rooftops. "Okay, so first, my friend-Tommy, you know him-he was inviting us over for this weekend, and by us I mean me and Ranboo, the kid you heard on call a while back, you remember him, right? So he's inviting us, and then this kid, Purpled, I can't fuckin' stand the guy, interrupts and says he and Ranboo have a project for the programming class we're all in that they have to work on this weekend and only this weekend apparently, because he can't do it earlier or later, for whatever

fucking reason. So now our plans are kinda shot to shit because Ranboo was meant to bring-"

"Hive, my friend, not to cut this short, but have you managed to find any leads on Boss and the others?" Tommy asks, having already lived through the story Tubbo's telling him, and Tubbo starts to type, loud and fast. Tommy swings past a few alleys, keeping his eyes on the street; you never know when you'll see someone getting mugged.

Tubbo hums uncertainly, and Tommy lands on the rooftop of a pretty short building. *"Well, there's been no reported activity that looks too unusual, but I'm checking black market listings and hitman offers now,"* Tubbo says, and while Tommy would normally be worried that Tubbo'll get tracked down or some shit, he had once managed to make the front page of several national news sites blast a rickroll when you tried to click on an article, without getting caught, just because he'd been bored. *"Right, so nothing there, but I'm looking into a bunch of different databases of research companies to see if there's anything there about the stolen goods."*

Tommy nods and starts swinging again, waving to a couple of primary school-aged kids as he passes by. They start excitedly chattering once they think he's not looking, and Tommy grins; that's one of the parts of this that he'll love no matter what. Tommy spots a girl walking alone, and a guy walking the same way with a notepad in hand, and The Sense starts to pulse at the back of his head. So Tommy drops down in front of the girl, and in his peripheral vision, the guy falters back a little, moving a bit to the right where, if Tommy were a normal person with normal peripherals, he'd be out of Tommy's line of vision.

The girl seems a little astonished, and she blinks. "Uh, hello, Spider-Man," she says, and he grins at her. She glances over her shoulder and her gaze hardens.

"Miss, can I offer you an escort home?" he asks, and the guy doesn't walk away, instead scribbling something down. God, Tommy hates creeps. "This part of the neighborhood can be pretty shady."

Her shoulders go from tense to relaxed. "Oh, that would be great,

but I'm actually on my way to work, if that's alright," she says, and Tommy nods. Her grip on her bag tightens minutely. "You don't mean-like, we won't be *swinging*, will we? I'm kinda afraid of heights."

"Nah, I can walk you," he says easily, and she smiles, starting to continue her way, and Tommy walks next to her, hands in his hoodie pocket. As he glances back, the guy's started to walk in the other direction. "He's gone now, don't worry. Figured I could scare 'im off, being London's resident super-spider n' all. What's your name?"

"Hannah," the girl answers, offering her hand, and Tommy shakes it. She seems pretty nice. "I can't tell you how many times journalists have tried to follow me to work. I appreciate the escort."

Tommy just shrugs, and although he's a little surprised, that *would* explain the notepad. "No skin off my back. How far's your work?" he asks, and Hannah points to a tall building up ahead. Tommy vaguely recognizes it as the same building Kristin works in. "Oh, so it's not far, then?"

"Nah, and I can take it from here now that he's gone, it's just another block," Hannah says easily, and she beams at Tommy. "Thanks, Spider-Man!"

Tommy gives her a two-fingered salute and starts swinging through the streets again. Tubbo, as it seems, is still looking for leads. "*I think I've found something, but I'm not sure. It's this experimental site... the coordinates are encrypted, though,*" Tubbo says, sounding rather perplexed, and Tommy perks up. That'll help to get his mind off of things for sure! Breaking into a lab for valuable information regarding heavy weaponry? Yes fucking please. "*Right, I'm sending you the location now, but it looks like it's underground, almost. Like, the street address is for aboveground, I mean. The place itself...*"

"Is it in the tube line?" Tommy asks as the address pops up in the corner of his vision, and he turns abruptly, heading right for it. The Sense is right there with him, like it knows where to go, like it knows where to lead him. Tubbo hums an affirmative, and Tommy heads down towards the nearest train platform, ducking down and waving vaguely at the people who marvel at him as he walks by.

"Where are you going?" Tubbo asks, and Tommy dashes into one of the tunnels, ignoring the security guards that call after him as he hops the barrier. *"Spidey, seriously, how the hell d'you know where to go...?"*

"Hive, you have to trust me here, okay?" Tommy says as soon as he dips into the abandoned part of the tube line. He knows these tunnels like the back of his hand; he hasn't been here in a while, sure, but when you've spent the majority of your secondary school years dancing around curfew in a place where you can claim bad cell signal, it's instinct. And Tommy knows exactly which tunnels to go down.

"Spider-Man, how the fuck are you navigating these tunnels?" Tubbo demands, more like a statement than a sentence, and it's laced with barely-concealed panic. Tommy freezes up, swallowing hard.

He takes a deep breath and keeps going. "Don't worry about that," he says firmly, and Tubbo falls silent; there's no typing to be heard anymore. "Is it... it's gotta be this way-or maybe over here? Fuck, I don't remember. No, no, it's *definitely* this way, i-it's... shit."

Tubbo's still scarily quiet, but the typing starts back up again. *"Take a left, then two rights once the tunnels fork,"* he says, kind of monotonously, and Tommy follows his instructions. Now this is starting to look more familiar. The Sense chirps-like a *chirping* sound actually happens in the back of his head-and Tommy grins. *"You're right on top of the coordinates now."*

Tommy glances around for the hatch; it's in one of the walls here, it has to be, and now that he's got his enhanced vision, he doesn't even have to use his phone's flashlight this time. His heart drums loudly in his chest. Tubbo makes a vaguely concerned noise, and Tommy rolls his eyes. Of course Tubbo's monitoring his vitals.

"It's here," Tommy says breathlessly as he opens the hatch and steps inside. The Sense chirps again, and he grins. "Oh, it's all still here!"

"Is this... is this your lab, bossman?" Tubbo asks hesitantly, almost hopefully, as if the alternative he's thinking of is worse, and Tommy

shakes his head. But it's all here, everything he remembers from that night, untouched even after the months since he's been here.

The tables are still haphazardly placed around the room, and while the lab equipment is no longer functioning, covered in thin layers of dust that come away with the delicate brush of Tommy's fingers, he can still see the liquids and gases bubbling and churning in his mind's eye exceptionally well. Tommy glances over to the spot on the floor where shards of glass are scattered and he crouches.

He wonders if he can still find the spider.

Tommy stands again, looking around the room. The half-erased equations are still on the board. Papers are still strewn everywhere, remnants of what had clearly been a rushed exit, a hurried escape. Tommy picks a few up, and he hears Tubbo's typing start up again, like he's either transcribing the texts or scanning them into PDFs, and Tommy lays out as many important-looking ones on the least occupied table as he can.

Once Tubbo's typing stops, Tommy moves over to the mostly-empty terrariums by the back wall, frowning at the few corpses of spiders that are in some. He trails his fingers over the glass of one that looks scarily similar to the one that had bit him, the only difference being a shock of bright blue that runs down its thorax.

"You poor thing," he murmurs, and he steps back from the terrariums, glancing around at the ground. Aha! There's the one that had bit him. Tommy frowns; there are a few chunks ripped from its body, likely the work of rats or other pests running around in the tube line. "That's the one that bit me, y'know. That's how I got my powers."

Tubbo makes a slight noise of surprise. *"You got your powers from an actual spider? Like, no radioactive accident or nuclear waste?"* he asks, still sounding slightly shaken, and Tommy nods, moving back to the other terrariums. *"Do you think... were they creating these spiders in this lab for that? Whoever was in this lab before you, I mean."*

"Probably," Tommy says honestly. He can't think of any other

reasons to keep a bunch of weirdly-patterned arachnids in an abandoned laboratory in the tube line. "Have you found any information about who started this lab?"

"N-No, *not yet*," Tubbo says, and he starts typing again. Tommy's brows furrow; he wonders what's got Tubbo so distracted today.

He takes a minute to look around again. Without this place, he would've never become Spider-Man. Idly, Tommy wonders where he would be right now without superpowers. Probably not snooping around a shady lab, that's for certain. He wonders if the villains that have emerged since his debut would've operated irregardless of his presence. Maybe Blaze and 404 would still be terrorizing the public; maybe they'd be normal people going about their business.

Tommy finds it a little ironic, but it's like the butterfly effect, innit? Without his powers, he never would've been a superhero, the villains may or may not have even existed, he wouldn't be somewhat closer to Techno. If he hadn't seen that hatch, would he just be at home, bothering Wilbur into playing a song on his guitar for him? Would Tommy just be what he's always been, just a normal kid?

Would his hands still shake at rumbling floors? Would he still feel that thrum of anxiety whenever he feels that something's off? Or would he have not come into contact with any of the things that have happened to him?

Surely, if whoever had made this lab-created these spiders-had been successful, there would still be a superpowered individual out there doing good work, wouldn't there?

Or had his powers been meant to be used for something nefarious?

"Any updates?" Tommy asks, because if he thinks about this for too long, it's bound to make his head hurt. Tubbo sighs, and Tommy takes that as a no. He continues to sift through the papers, making his way through each table until he finds a file buried underneath some of the lab equipment, most of which Tommy can't make heads or tails of in terms of perceived purpose. There's messy writing scrawled across the front of the file, big and looping letters in pitch black ink. "I think I've found something, Hive..."

Project: Guided Evolution

Tubbo gasps. *"Fuck, fuck, this is top secret shit, bossman,"* he says, frantically typing. *"It's way too fucking encrypted to get through, I can't make heads or tails of the code protecting it either, it's a project from-dammit, it won't even show me the company heading it! This is protected more heavily than military records are, what the shit?!"*

Tommy lays the file out on top of the table and opens it up, eyes widening. There's a photo clipped to the top of the papers within the folder. It doesn't show the subject's face, but there's a bite that looks almost exactly the one he'd had, only it's pulsing a faint green color rather than red. The label under it reads *Subject 1, twenty minutes after initial infection.*

The phrasing of it makes Tommy a little nauseous. The Sense almost seems offended at the term infection. His powers hadn't... infected him. He'd been bitten, sure, but it's not an infection, it's not some virus or bacteria or whatever. "What the fuck?" Tommy whispers, starting to read the observation notes. "'Subject is responding positively thus far, though it's only been two minutes since the initial infection. The spider is dead. We have incinerated it-' Oh, that's just fucked!"

"Keep reading, it's likely the best information we're gonna get because-and I'm sorry about this, but-I cannot get through these fucking blocks, they're indecipherable," Tubbo says, blatantly frustrated, and Tommy clears his throat.

"'Four minutes. The subject is showing signs of... ' Shit, man, this is gross. 'The subject is showing signs of intense nausea and slight oral hemorrhages,'" Tommy reads, resisting the urge to vomit at the close-up picture of some poor motherfucker's mouth drenched in blood. Tubbo audibly gags. Tommy's hands are shaky. None of this shit had happened to him. "'Subject does not appear to be experiencing any of the beneficial side effects intended from the infection. He is complaining of a migraine and... feeling as though his jaw is tearing in two.'"

Tommy has to look away for a minute. Poor, unlucky bastard. *"What*

else does it say?” Tubbo asks, sounding as if he very much doesn’t want to hear the answer to that question as he continues to type.

“Twenty minutes. He’s bleeding. Shit. Shit. He’s fucking bleeding everywhere, his jaw’s in two, I don’t want to keep writing but he’s making me keep track of this, his jaw is fucking splitting, he’s screaming,” Tommy says numbly, and Tubbo’s typing stops. “His jaw just fucking unhinged, he can’t speak anymore, I’m stopping so I can hold his jaw together.”

His voice is trembling.

“Is that everything?” Tubbo asks, equally as shaky.

Tommy averts his eyes from the blurry photograph taped close to the writing and flips over to the next paper. It’s different handwriting, the same handwriting that’s on the front of the file folder. “It’s been three days and I haven’t healed. We’re developing something for me to wear that’ll keep my jaw together and allow me to speak. My voice will be different. I...” Tommy trails off, putting a hand up to his own masked face. Tubbo makes a choked sound. “I can’t believe it didn’t work. I’m going to be like this forever. She was right. I shouldn’t have tried to fix it myself, I reaped none of the intended benefits. I do not heal faster, nor am I physically stronger. I have no enhanced senses as intended. The others tell me they have night terrors of what had happened frequently, and I think it is caused by an unintended side effect. I never should have done this, but now I cannot stop until I fix what I have become.”

That’s the end of the file.

With shaky hands, Tommy tucks the papers and photographs back into the file neatly and puts it under his arm. *“That’s not going to happen to you, y’know. I won’t let it,”* Tubbo says fiercely, and Tommy nods. If it hadn’t happened to him initially, it’s not going to now. He’ll be just fine, his jaw isn’t gonna... unhinge. *“We’ll bring the file here and compare it to the papers, there’s probably something genetic that didn’t work with Subject One, there’s nothing to panic over.”*

“Yeah, I’ll... I’m heading back up and to yours to go over the file,”

Tommy says, still feeling the urge to touch his jaw and make sure it's intact. He takes a few deep breaths and tries to calm himself. That's not going to happen to him. Tubbo's right. Clearly, they hadn't perfected whatever experiment they'd been doing, and Tommy had gotten lucky enough to get the spider that worked. "I'll see you in a few, Hive, I-"

He cuts himself off, tensing as The Sense starts to tingle at the back of his mind. Tommy keeps the file close to him and steps closer to the hatch, trying hard to listen for any signs of potential movement. There aren't any, so Tommy carefully crawls through the passage and starts walking quietly through the tunnel.

The Sense is incredibly displeased by this decision.

Tommy pauses.

There's something-someone-looming behind him.

"Hand over the file, little spider."

Woohoo! Finally, we're getting to the good stuff!

symbiote

Chapter 24: symbiote

Tommy has his first encounter with Slime, and Tubbo comes to several realizations.

Boy, oh boy, who's ready for some more badly-written action sequences? I know I am!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Well, then.

Tommy's in a bit of a sticky situation, you see.

The thing-whatever the fuck it is-is *enormous*, and a weird, Jell-o color green, almost see-through to the point where Tommy can vaguely make out a humanoid shape within it, and he pales. The thing tilts its head at him, like it's sizing him up.

"The little spider is just a baby. We cannot harm it," it says, and Tommy laughs nervously, eyes wide and panicked. The thing shakes its head insistently. "No, no, Boss says you *must*, we know this! Ah, but he is scared of us! Little spider, tiny spider, hand over the file so we can be friends, see? *No!* Seize the boy! I won't! We *have* to!"

"You seem to be having a *very* compelling argument with yourself there, big fella, I think I should leave you alone to finish it," Tommy

says, and as he takes a step back, the thing takes a step forward. It's, like, twice his fucking size. This is utterly terrifying. "Look, buddy, whatever you've got going on? Great look for you, the color green is quite lovely, I think. I have to go visit someone, I've got plans, yeah?"

The thing fucking *coos* at him, like he's a toddler or something trying to get away with taking cookies from the jar without anyone seeing. "Little spider has friends!" it says, and Tommy nods. The little spider does *indeed* have friends, ones that would definitely notice if he were to be maimed by a giant Jell-o monstrosity. "What is little spider's name?"

It extends its hand, and Tommy takes it between his index finger and thumb, cringing at the fucking *squelching* noise it makes as he delicately shakes it. "I'm Spider-Man, and I kinda really have to take this file," he says, and the thing makes a displeased noise.

"Enough procrastinating!" it roars, and Tommy stumbles back. It blinks its blank white eyes, then puts its hands out, like it's apologizing for something. "We do not mean to scare you, Spider-Man. File?"

It outstretches its hand, and Tommy shrinks back. "I can't give you the file. It has very important... medical information... that I have to investigate," Tommy says, because that's actually true, and this thing hasn't *immediately* resorted to solving things with violence, so it's worth a shot to try and talk it out. "I'm sorry, you seem like a really nice Jell-o monster, but I *do* have to take this with me."

The thing lowers its head slightly. "We are not... Jell-o. We are Slime," it says, and Tommy winces. Oof. So *that's* the symbiote, huh? Slime slumps down to look him directly in the eyes, and Tommy leans back. "We need the file. Sorry about this, little spider."

"Sorry about wh-"

Tommy's back slams into the wall of the tunnel, and the wind gets knocked out of him. He's panting on the ground, coughing and sputtering as he clutches the file. "*Holy fucking shit, oh my God,*" Tubbo says, "*what the fuck are we dealing with?! What the fuck is*

that?!"

"Slime, pal, amigo, buddy," Tommy wheezes out as Slime steps closer to where he'd fucking *launched* Tommy, "you don't gotta-we can talk about it! Oh, shit-

He is swiftly kicked further down the tunnel.

For fuck's sakes.

"Get up! Quick, he's coming, he's almost to you again, roll out of the way!" Tubbo shouts, and Tommy flings himself to the left as Slime charges towards him. Thankfully, he misses this time, and Tommy stands, leaning against the wall. *"Your ribs are bruised, not broken, but you shouldn't take another hit, alright?! Just leave the file behind, leave it!"*

"Fuck are you on about? 'Course I'm not leavin' it," Tommy mumbles as Slime slowly turns his head all the way around, then the rest of his body follows-dear God, that's horrifying. "Hey, Slime, don't you remember? I'm a little spider! Just a tiny fella, harmless, really-! AH!"

He dodges Slime's incoming fist by leaping to the ceiling and dropping down behind the towering symbiote, an embarrassing squeak of a noise escaping him as he dives out of the way of Slime's next kick. "We need the file for Boss," Slime says, and Tommy scowls as he jumps backwards, out of range of another punch. "We do not want to hurt little spider."

Tommy scoffs, firing a web at Slime's arm. It slides right off. Son of a bitch. "Bit late for that one, don't you think?!" he says, ducking to the right as Slime makes a mad grab for him. This fight is *not* going in Tommy's favor. Unfortunately, Tommy had dodged his way into Slime's *other* hand, which he evidently can make big enough to grab Tommy by the waist, pinning his arms to his sides and lifting him up. "Ack-! Fuck! Get off!"

"File," Slime demands, but he's quite literally trapped it in Tommy's hand. When Tommy attempts to point this out to him, Slime shakes him up and down. It's quite a disorienting experience. "File!"

"I can't *give* you the file!" Tommy protests, and Slime shakes him again. Tommy's stomach lurches, and he struggles. "Dude, cut that out, I'm gonna puke in my fucking mask and then *nobody's* gonna be happy!"

"*Okay, so you know how you said not to make S.P.I.D.E.R.?*" Tubbo asks, and Tommy lets his eyes slide closed in frustration. He's about to be eaten-absorbed?-by a villainous symbiote with rows of knives for teeth, and Tubbo's worried about a *drone*? Tommy and Slime glare at each other. Evidently, Tubbo takes that as his cue to continue. "*I may or may not have installed it in your suit anyway.*"

Slime shakes Tommy again. He nearly retches. "I am *telling* you, stop shaking me! I literally cannot hand you the file, you have trapped my arms and subsequently screwed yourself out of getting it," Tommy says, and Slime seems confused for a moment.

"Then you will be brought in with the file," he says, and Tommy starts to struggle *wildly*. No, sir, not fucking today. He does *not* want to go to whatever fucking place Slime had come from, and he is fairly fucking sure he doesn't want to find out what Boss wants to do with him and the file. "Spider-Man, stop struggling, or we will crush your bones."

Tommy stops struggling.

Slime starts to walk through the tunnel. "Y'know, I much prefer my bones uncrushed," he says, and Slime grunts. And honestly, it would be *great* if Tubbo could jump in with that drone right about now, if only to distract Slime long enough for Tommy to escape. Tommy starts to ramble nervously. "Fun fact about spiders, actually-I don't know if you know this, but tarantulas can actually learn to like being pet and subsequently experience a feeling like touch starvation in people. Also, jumping spiders can be taught to perform tricks, so they're kind of like the dogs of the arachnid world, and-"

"Do you ever stop talking?" Slime growls, and Tommy laughs nervously, grimacing as Slime's grip gets a little too tight for comfort.

"Y'know, lots of criminals ask me that. So you're the strong and silent type, then?" he asks, and Slime squeezes again, presumably

in annoyance. "Right! Point taken...!"

There's a few clicks and some typing in his comms, and Tommy brightens up. "*Finally got it to work*," Tubbo breathes out, and Tommy hears a whirring noise coming from his chest, and the spider emblem breaks away, propelled by tiny whirring blades.

"*S.P.I.D.E.R. to the rescue! I'll get you out of here, don't you worry.*"

Tommy's wondering how exactly that small piece of metal is going to get him out, and then it fucking *expands*, rapidly shifting and clicking until it's the size of Tommy's head. S.P.I.D.E.R. is appropriately named, considering it's a sleek metal tarantula, with a pitch black body and red eyes. Slime is understandably startled, and as he goes to punch at it with his free hand, S.P.I.D.E.R. leaps up into the air, tucking its legs under its body as it fucking *floats*, the red eyes glowing.

Of fucking course Tubbo had equipped it with tiny guns.

Slime abruptly drops Tommy as the bullets-little rubber pellets, upon closer inspection-start to fire at him. Tommy ducks out of the way and makes a fucking *run* for it, and Tubbo's probably piloting S.P.I.D.E.R., considering it veers out of the way of every one of Slime's attempts to take it down and speeds forwards to fly next to Tommy, still firing at Slime. It doesn't seem to be doing any damage whatsoever, but it *is* proving to be an incredible distraction.

"Did you fucking make a flying gun shaped like a spider?!" Tommy whisper-yells, and Tubbo's responding cackle tells him all he needs to know. Tommy continues to run through the tunnels, relying on his memory to lead him through the labyrinth, and S.P.I.D.E.R. continues to fire beside him. "Okay, I can't just call this thing by its acronym every fuckin' time, Hive, I'm gonna give it a nickname."

"*That can wait until you're out of the tube line and are no longer running from an insanely strong symbiote, dickhead*," Tubbo reminds him, and Tommy has to admit he's got a point. As he ducks through another tunnel, *finally* making it to the active part of the tube line, Tommy leaps on the ceiling and flattens his back against it. S.P.I.D.E.R. folds itself back into the empty spot in his hoodie, and Tommy grins as a train starts to move under him, dropping down to

lay flat on its roof. *"You're damaging your ribs further, you absolute moron. You're lucky you heal so quickly."*

Tommy rolls his eyes as the train slows to a stop in the station, and he's very relieved to see that Slime doesn't appear to have attempted to follow him. He probably has orders not to be seen in public, if Boss's attempts to keep people out of the hall of mirrors are any indication of how he handles criminal activity. If that's the case, then it's likely that Boss is operating separate to Blaze and 404, given how fucking public the latter tend to be.

"Hello, folks, just your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man hitching a ride on the tube line, don't mind me," Tommy says, hopping off of the train and strolling through the platform and posing for a few bystanders as they take photos. "Right, have a good trip, cheers, fellas!"

He dashes out and *thwips* out a web to start swinging through the city again. Tubbo is oddly quiet as he does; Tommy's not even getting the usual sarcastic comments that come with crime alerts. And when Tommy *does* start to head for a crime alert, because it's on his way to Tubbo's place anyway, Tubbo manually takes the address out of his view.

"Get your ass to my house. Now," Tubbo says, and he logs off.

Well, if there's anything more terrifying than a massive, slimy symbiote that argues with itself like an old married couple, it's an angry Tubbo.

Tommy lands on Tubbo's windowsill and is promptly yanked in by the front of his hoodie, tossed rather unceremoniously onto the floor, and he sputters, clutching at his ribs. Tubbo looks a bit apologetic at that, but it's overshadowed by what mostly looks like rage and disbelief. As he stands, Tommy dusts himself off and tosses the file onto Tubbo's bed, crossing his arms.

"Well *that* was rude," he scoffs, and Tubbo just continues to glare at him. Tommy's brows furrow; there should be no reason for Tubbo to

be pissed right now, logically speaking. He's been far more injured before, and all Tubbo had shown then was concern and a desire to help him out, so he can't possibly be pissed that Tommy's gotten himself hurt again. "What? What is it? Do I have something on my face? Wh-"

"Take your mask off," Tubbo bites out, and Tommy blinks at him. Tubbo just narrows his eyes, jaw clenched, and Tommy winces at the memory of the image in the file. "Do I have to repeat myself?! Take the fucking mask off!"

"I'm not gonna take my mask off, fuck are you on about?" Tommy asks, rather panicked, because Tubbo *can't* know. He's already in so much danger, Tommy can't let him see who he really is. "It's called a *secret* identity for a reason-"

"Tommy, take your fucking mask off," Tubbo says, voice quiet and laced with barely-contained fury.

Ah.

Shit.

Tommy tries to laugh it off, but he sounds panicked, even to himself. "I'm not-what are you talking about, Tubbo? Of course I'm not Tommy, I..." he trails off. Tubbo's hands are shaking. "I promise, I'm-"

"Don't bullshit me," Tubbo interjects. His gaze is hardened and determined, and Tommy tenses. There's no way Tubbo knows. "If you don't take that mask off, I'm gonna rip it off myself, so pick your fucking poison, Tommy."

There are two options here.

One, go back to using his old suit and never talk to Tubbo ever again. Of course, this option isn't feasible, considering Tommy's fairly certain that Tubbo would just hunt him down anyway. Not to mention, it would make a lot of people ask a lot of questions.

And two, he could take the mask off. Reveal himself.

"I'm sorry," Tommy whispers, "I can't."

"The fuck d'you mean you *can't*?! Take it off!" Tubbo demands, shoving at Tommy's shoulders, and Tommy stumbles back.

"I can't do that to you," Tommy says, voice barely audible now and full of tremors. Because he *can't*, he can't willingly put Tubbo in more danger, he's already fucked up so bad, he's already let Tubbo make his tech. "I-I can't, Tubbo, I'm not-I can't do that to you, I'm sorry."

Tubbo's shoulders square, and he glares at Tommy. "You've done enough already," he says, and Tommy's fucking *wracked* with guilt at that. "So *fucking* take the mask off."

With quivering hands, Tommy finds the seam of the mask and slowly pulls it off, and Tubbo takes one look at him, then closes his eyes and sighs. "I know you're pissed, I'm so sorry, I didn't want to tell you, it'd put you in more danger and that's the *last* thing I want, Tubbo, you have to believe me," Tommy rambles, trying his hardest to keep the nerves from making his voice waver.

"You're a fucking idiot," Tubbo says before tackling Tommy into the carpet. Tommy can't tell whether or not it starts in a hug, but it ends up in Tubbo balling up the front of Tommy's hoodie and shaking him violently. "You let me *fanboy* over you, you motherfucking prick! I'm gonna kill you myself if Blaze and 404 don't do the job *for* me, I swear to fucking God!"

Tommy puts his hands up in surrender. "Woah, woah, Tubbo, calm yourself, we can talk about this *before* you make me puke all over your carpet," Tommy says, and Tubbo stops shaking him. Tommy's being tossed around a lot today, as it seems. "Seriously, I'm, like, *this* close."

Releasing his hold on Tommy's hoodie and snorting as his head smacks slightly against the ground, Tubbo sits back. "Okay, putting aside how mad I am with you for abusing your alter ego to make me *less* mad at you-and yes, I'm coming back to that, dickhead-how the *hell* did you manage to keep this a secret from me for so long?!" he asks, completely bewildered, and Tommy sits up, shrugging

helplessly. "You couldn't even keep quiet about my surprise party when we were twelve!"

"My lying has improved, apparently," Tommy sputters, and Tubbo glares at him. "How the fuck did you even figure it out?! I was being *so* careful! *Techno* even said that I was-oh, shit."

Tubbo shoves him. "Fucking *Techno Blade Watson* knew before I did?! What the fuck?! Telling your best friend that you've got superpowers is, like, friendship one-oh-fucking-one! You're such a prick, Tommy, oh my *God!*" Tubbo says, and Tommy bats his hands away. "I can't believe you just made me your tech guy because I was *mad* at you! You're unbelievable!"

"I didn't know what else to do! I couldn't exactly explain that the reason I kept ditching was because I'm Spider-Man without endangering you!" Tommy says frantically, and Tubbo makes a face at him. Tommy scoffs. "The fuck is it *now?!?*"

"Let me just get this straight," Tubbo says, rubbing his temples. "Not only did you become a superhero for no particular reason after acquiring powers that likely could have taken your *jaw* off, but you let me idolize your alter ego. And *then*, when your secret identity got in the way of our friendship, you *bribed* me into forgiving you by letting me work for you! Which endangers me anyway! Where the hell is your logic here?!"

Tommy lets out a *huh* and slumps back against the wall. "I'm gonna be honest with you, Tubbo, I don't really know what I was thinking there," he says, and Tubbo rolls his eyes. "But it wasn't a bribe, honest! Okay-granted, maybe it kind of *was*, but-I swear, the only reason I even did it to get you to forgive me is because I know for a fact how fucking brilliant you are, Big T! I see what you do firsthand, you really think I'm gonna let some fuckin' chump be my guy in the chair? Fuck no! It's you and me, Tubbo. 'Til the end."

He offers a hand to Tubbo in earnest, and Tubbo takes it. "You're still a moron, and I'm still mad at you," Tubbo says as he pulls his hand back. That's understandable. Tubbo buries his face in his hands and shakes his head. "I can't believe I've spent *weeks* talking about how cool Spider-Man is, and he's the biggest fucking dork I

know. This is bullshit. Utter bullshit. I am entitled to financial compensation.”

“If you’re looking for money, you came to the wrong guy, I’ve spent both my allowances on medical supplies,” Tommy says. Tubbo looks up at him, absolutely incredulous. Honestly, Tommy’s got no clue why he’s surprised. “I mean, I’ve also spent some of it on burgers, but that’s just because my powers have made me, like, slightly carnivorous.”

“I’ve watched you get *shot*,” Tubbo says, suddenly sounding very small, and Tommy sucks in a breath. “You were just tossed around by a fucking *slime symbiote*. You’ve been chasing down carjackers and-and supervillains, and fucking-you’ve been *shot*, Tommy!”

Tommy grimaces. “Yeah, that tends to happen with criminals sometimes,” he jokes in an attempt to alleviate at least a little bit of the world’s most suffocating tension, but Tubbo doesn’t laugh. “Seriously, how the hell did you even figure it out?”

Tubbo clears his throat. “You knew your way around the tube line way too well. That, paired with what you said on Halloween... well, it’s not hard to put the pieces together,” Tubbo says shakily, and Tommy’s a bit embarrassed now. Now Tubbo’s gonna know that he’s got weaknesses, Tubbo knows the reason why his hands get so shaky, why he’s so jumpy. “It would be stupid to ask if you’re okay, because you’re obviously having some kind of breakdown, but you’re clearly doing the Tommy Denial thing you do-”

“I don’t do a ‘Tommy Denial’ thing-”

“Yes, you fucking do, you’re doing it right now, you did it whenever Ranboo brought up the fact you get *panic attacks*-”

“Tubbo, I don’t get *panic attacks*, I just get nervous sometimes! Everybody does!” Tommy huffs, and all he gets in return is a flat stare. “What?! I don’t!”

Tubbo smacks his forehead. “You’re a fucking idiot. I literally cannot stand you,” he says, and Tommy squawks in offense. He’s not an *idiot*, but he certainly doesn’t get panic attacks, that’s for fucking

sure. Tubbo starts listing occurrences on his fingers. "You have one every time you're on a brick building, you had one in the cafeteria, one in Wilbur's class, one in the bathroom that day you came back to school, you had one-"

"Okay, I see your fucking point!" Tommy cuts him off, and Tubbo raises a brow at him. "They aren't *panic attacks*, they are momentary bouts of-"

"Oh, fuck off with that shit, Tommy, they *are* panic attacks and you fucking know it. But I'm not going to play therapist with you, because I know we'd *both* hate that, so just tell somebody that they're happening or at least admit it to yourself," Tubbo tells him, and Tommy glowers at him, but he stays silent anyway. The last thing he wants to do is piss Tubbo off further, after all. "I'm going to be a good friend and start testing shit for you so that you're not scared your jaw's gonna fall off-because I know you are, anybody would be, I'm scared for *my* jaw after that."

Tommy stays on the floor as Tubbo grabs the file from the bed and moves to his desk. "Thank you," he mumbles, drawing his knees up to his chest. His phone buzzes in his hoodie pocket-the one with the zipper, it's specifically designed to keep his phone safe-and Tommy takes it out. Ah, he should've expected this. "Hey, Phil. I'm at Tubbo's, what's up?"

At least it's not a lie this time.

"*Hi, Toms,*" Phil greets him warmly, and Tommy smiles in spite of himself. At least there's *one* person today that's not mad at him, someone else, or themselves. "*I'm gonna order out for dinner, but all Tech said is that he's sick of pizza, and Wilbur gave me an equally unhelpful answer of 'I don't give a shit, old man,' so I'm deferring to you, at least until Kristin gets out of work.*"

Tommy hums. "I dunno. I'm not really hungry," he says, and Tubbo turns around to give him a weird look. Tommy brings his knees even closer to his chest, and he takes a shaky deep breath as he switches the phone to his other hand. "How was your day, Dad?"

Phil's voice gets soft. "*Are you okay?*" he asks, and Tommy's hands

start to shake. *"It's alright if you're still upset about the boys fighting, mate. Do you want to talk about it, or do you want me to tell you about my day?"*

He knows what that offer really means; he's seen Phil give the same one to Techno after a particularly difficult exam and to Wilbur when his guitar strings had broken after the music store closed for the night. "Tell me about your day, please," Tommy says quietly, self-conscious of Tubbo's observant stare.

"Alright, I can do that," Phil says easily, and Tommy's mouth quirks up in a shaky smile. *"Well, I've been lecturing corporate shitheads all afternoon because apparently nobody double-checks their math anymore. I'm having to crunch all the numbers again, which takes me three hours, even with help from some of the interns. Then, when I tell this motherfucker to do his damn job right, they go 'Be professional, Watson,' and fuck them, I was practically seeing red, I was so mad."*

Tommy snorts. "Should've gone feral on 'em, Phil," he says, and Phil laughs, a good-natured sound that makes Tommy's smile less shaky. "Did anything else eventful happen?"

"Other than Kristin texting me that one of her colleagues was escorted to work by Spider-Man? Not much," Phil says, and Tommy wilts at the mention of his alter ego. He doesn't want Phil to pick a side, only to be disappointed later. It seems to be a recurring theme these days. *"If you want, I can get those burgers you like again."*

"That sounds good," Tommy murmurs. "I'll see you when I get back from Tubbo's."

"See you then!" Phil says, chipper as ever, and Tommy hangs up.

Tubbo drums his fingers on the desk, having turned back around at some point during Tommy's conversation. "So... does he know?" he asks, and Tommy scoffs.

"Of course he doesn't, d'you actually think Phil would have willingly let me be a fuckin' superhero, Tubbo?" he says, and Tubbo just hums. He's looking at the papers from the lab still, and Tommy shifts

uncomfortably. "The only other person that knows is Techno. That's it."

Gnawing at his bottom lip, Tommy grabs his mask and stands. He winces when his torso aches, but he's not too worried. Worst case, he'll have bruises for a couple of days. As he makes his way over to the window, Tubbo gets out of his chair and grabs him by the wrist. Tommy turns to face him, and Tubbo's eyes lock onto the bee pin.

Tubbo smiles, just a little, and Tommy's grip on the mask tightens. "You're a good person doing a good thing, even if you've made astronomically stupid decisions while doing it," he says, and Tommy snorts. Tubbo looks determined. "I mean it, Tommy. I still think you should've fucking told me, and I'm gonna be pissed for a good bit, but I'm glad it's you. I don't think anyone else in the whole of Britain would be stupid enough to get superpowers and jump right to fighting crime."

"Yeah, unearned confidence is usually more of an American fad," Tommy jokes, and Tubbo lets go of his arm to shove lightly at his shoulder. "I'm sorry again. I just didn't want you to be in any danger. As much as I hate to admit it, I care about your wellbeing or whatever."

Tubbo grins. "Unfortunately for the both of us, I care about yours too, so you're gonna be stuck with me, bossman," he says, and Tommy fights back a smile. Tubbo perks up-Tommy can practically see the lightbulb go off in his head-and he dashes back towards the computer, typing frantically. "Hey, wait a fuckin' second, get over here!"

"Uh, okay...?" Tommy says, walking over to stand next to Tubbo as he pulls up something beside the scan of one of the papers from the lab. It almost looks like- "Are those my fucking *medical records*?!"

Tubbo waves dismissively. "Unimportant," he says, and Tommy would argue that no the fuck it is not, but Tubbo barrels on regardless. "Right, so the genetic testing that these guys did reveals that one of them has *this* gene-I don't know how the fuck to pronounce it-but your records don't have it! You have this one instead, dunno how to pronounce that one either, shit's got, like,

three 'X's in it, I'm not gonna bother."

Brows furrowed, Tommy leans closer to the screen and follows to where Tubbo's cursor has highlighted. Sure enough, the genes don't match up. "D'you think that's why the spider worked on me? That gene that I've got?" Tommy asks, and Tubbo sits back down in the chair, typing away in a secure web browser.

Evidently, he gets the results he's looking for, because he looks up at Tommy with wide eyes. "I think it is," he says, and he turns back to the monitor, eyes scanning over the lines of text. "It's apparently a really rare recessive gene, only shows up in about... seven thousand people recorded worldwide. Holy *shit*, Tommy!"

"Well, guess that answers my question," Tommy mumbles, blinking in surprise. "So I just, what, got lucky? I'd have lost my jaw like that guy if I hadn't had that gene?!"

Tubbo puts his hands up. "Now, I'm not a biologist, and I'm *definitely* not a genealogist, but other than that, I don't see any major differences," he says, and Tommy runs a hand through his hair.

"Shit."

"Yeah. Shit."

Tommy stares down at himself for a moment.

"... I think I'm gonna name the drone Shroud."

Now Tubbo knows! How might this affect literally everything else, you may ask? We'll just have to find out ;)

the in-between

Chapter 25: the in-between

An insight into The In-Between.

TW for implied/referenced suicide.

A bit of a world-building/lore chapter for today! It's a *lot* different from our normal vibe, but I hope you guys enjoy it!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The Keeper is not a man of belief.

He is, however, a man of proof, and while there is very little *scientific* evidence he can rely on in his line of work, he can see it with his own two eyes, and that's enough proof for him. Now, The Keeper hadn't expected to be stuck working the case of this reality for so long, but he supposes it cannot be helped. The Keeper has watched this reality through many timelines, many names, many different pairs of eyes.

This form, though, is his most successful yet out of the lot of them. He's gotten farther with this form than others, kept timelines going for far longer when he acts in this role. It doesn't hurt that it's a comfortable body to be in, either. In one attempt, he'd tried to take over one of the bodies closest to The Catalyst, but the spirit had proven to be far stronger than his own. So The Keeper had invented his own body, if only to avoid any future misunderstandings.

The Keeper's current form also seems sufficient in terms of appearing properly unthreatening, someone easy to talk to and someone with few suspicions cast upon him. Nothing like his cosmic form, which would prove far too horrific to make any meaningful connections with human beings. He's forged nearly every type of relationship in this form, all in different timelines. He's made friends and lost them, fallen in and out of love. The only one he's missing is a parental relationship, but The Keeper finds that particular one to be of no interest; he cannot create spawn irregardless, but to claim responsibility for another life and see it cast away on behalf of yet another failed timeline seems counterproductive. Inefficient, if you will.

And since The Keeper is rather fond of efficiency, he *does* tend to get frustrated when The Catalyst throws yet another wrench into the cogs.

Unfortunately, while The Keeper is keen and determined to preserve The Catalyst, to let him live his life fully, The Catalyst... is not. Four hundred and ninety-seven timelines ago, The Keeper would have told you that The Catalyst is a self-sacrificial moron with no regard for his own life. Now, though, The Keeper would just sigh and tell you that The Catalyst is a tired child who has taken on far too much responsibility.

There are multiple Keepers-he is not the only one, not the first, nor will he be the last. The Keeper tires easily now, but he knows that this reality is his duty alone to protect. There have been timelines within it that had collapsed in on themselves, timelines where he'd revealed too much and everything had come crashing down around him.

In all honesty, The Keeper could do without the complications of the timeline his focus is currently on. The Abominations are emerging much more quickly than they typically do when the course of events follows a similar path, and it's clear that The Catalyst is struggling to keep up, particularly emotionally.

Vaguely, The Keeper wonders if he could still manually count how many Catalysts are in The In-Between now, or if his records are his only hope for keeping track of the amount.

The In-Between spans across an unending stretch of the seventh dimension. The Keeper only controls a portion of it, though the portion is large enough that the amount of Catalysts should not feel as suffocating as it does. He has modeled it after The Catalyst's favorite place, at least according to The Keeper's records.

It looks like a grand train platform-not one that you might find underground, but a beautiful station. The Catalyst had visited thrice as a child, and the image of it still serves to calm his nerves. The Keeper finds this fascinating; to think, a bustling station, normally full of overwhelming sensations, is where The Catalyst feels at ease.

Nevertheless, The Keeper will not deprive The Catalyst of comfort. It makes sense, honestly; if The Catalyst is at ease in a memory reminiscent of well-decorated chaos, The Keeper is not surprised. The Catalyst could probably make a home out of whatever The Keeper chooses to model The In-Between after, but no Catalyst has died in that station, so The Keeper thinks it wise to use a location that *all* Catalysts can be comfortable in.

This is to say, The Keeper is not a cruel being; he treasures human life, he wants to see it thrive and grow. The Keeper is human and not quite human, which makes this all a bit tricky. He's felt every emotion on the spectrum, which is usually the criteria for judging the humanity of a being, but he knows that he's not *entirely* a person. Unlike his more human counterparts, The Keeper has a set destiny, a set duty, something he has been inherently put in this reality to accomplish.

Humans, of course, forge their own purposes, and this has always been somewhat of an intriguing notion to The Keeper. To not know what you exist to accomplish must be both incredibly freeing and crushingly existential. The Keeper holds admiration for people in this sense; he could not see himself in their place, wandering around to find a way to be happy, to feel fulfilled. The Keeper can, however, sympathize with a lack of fulfillment.

After all, when The Keeper sleeps in the physical realm, he is faced with nothing but reminders of his own failures in the metaphysical realm. This is not meant, though, to imply that The Keeper experiences dreams. He does not dream, he does not have night

terrors. He simply enters into The In-Between. The In-Between is, by all purposes, The Keeper's point of origin, for lack of a better term.

Four hundred and ninety-seven timelines ago, The Keeper had been surprised at the presence of a Catalyst in The In-Between. He had approached The Keeper, wary and frightened, eyes wide and brows furrowed as he had pleaded to know where he was. Of course, The Keeper had not yet been equipped to answer his questions, and he had stood by helplessly as The Catalyst had broken down into terrified sobs.

Now, though, that Catalyst is used to The In-Between. He'd been the first to arrive, after all. In time, The Keeper had learned how to break the news to The Catalyst that yes, he has died, and no, he cannot leave. Each Catalyst has a different reaction; The Keeper tends to notice that the younger each Catalyst is at the time of death has a proportionate effect on how he reacts.

The Keeper had never encountered a Catalyst that had taken the news well.

Sometimes, Catalysts will appear in The In-Between while The Keeper is present, and it saddens The Keeper to be flooded with the memory that he has failed in another timeline yet again. He had expected this reality to be easy. The Catalyst has many loved ones he cherishes and who cherish him, and a spirit that never wavers in its persistence-and The Keeper would know, he'd once tried to inhabit The Catalyst out of frustration and was promptly ushered out by The Catalyst's soul. This should have been The Keeper's easiest reality to handle, and yet he finds himself perplexed.

Every time The Keeper sleeps in the physical world, he looks out into a sea of Catalysts in the metaphysical world. A sea of tired children, of scared children, ranging from the delicate age of seven to the rowdy age of seventeen. The Catalyst has never lived to see his eighteenth birthday, and the thought of this saddens The Keeper.

A boy so young, so full of promise and potential, continuously snuffed out by a universe that is nothing but cruel to him.

The Keeper is not technically allowed to become attached to The

Catalyst in any capacity. It is hard, though, to avoid this when he looks into the eyes of the child he has failed over and over again. It is hard to avoid it when he holds each Catalyst as they mourn the loss of their timeline, their friends, their families. It is hard to avoid it when The Catalysts cannot see each other, and The Keeper is, therefore, their only company in The In-Between.

And cruelly, The Rules don't allow The Keeper to get close enough to directly interfere; he is allowed indirect intervention, pleasantries, small talk. He cannot be there for the Catalyst, not in a real sense. The Keeper must maintain this timeline without letting anyone know it has been endangered, and that means he cannot get close to The Catalyst. The Rules state that he cannot offer emotional assistance, nor is he allowed to tell The Catalyst about the mistakes his predecessors had made and how to rectify them.

Yet, The Keeper finds himself continuously intrigued by The Catalyst-intrigued by a boy who continues to face the horrors of his reality with a brave smile and a strength only mirrored by the scope of his compassion. It's his kindness that had caused his other timelines to end. The Keeper wishes that The Catalyst would be genuinely selfish for once, to *not* try to do the right thing, to put his own self-preservation above heroic ideals.

The Catalyst, without fail, never stops trying to do good. It's as admirable as it is frustrating, and The Keeper wonders what gives The Catalyst hope. Each time he's asked, he's received a different answer. The Catalyst, after all is said and done, after his last breath is snuffed out by the cold, unfeeling corners of the universe collecting another soul and spitting it back out again like a cherry pit, still remains.

And The Catalyst always takes whatever the universe hands him with a wink and a grin, ready to twist his own fate around in his hands like it's a convoluted sculpture, like *he's* the artist weaving the threads of destiny-of purpose-into the tapestry of his life. And The Keeper has never known what to do with that; he's never been able to understand the way The Catalyst laughs in the face of the devil, eases a smile out of whoever's holding him as he dies, stand up against the reality that's turned its back on him and tell it to go fuck itself. Does he not tire of being nice?

The Keeper finds this admirable. He can only hope to mirror The Catalyst's kindness. The Keeper does not understand how to navigate human relationships, even if he himself is so similar to them that one could not name the difference by comparing the two with the naked eye. If The Keeper knows anything, it's that The Catalyst, after everything, every timeline, every death... he is, simply put, a good person.

So, in spite of his better judgement, The Keeper had allowed himself to care for The Catalyst, to become affectionate towards the boy. This, of course, had made it heart-wrenching when The Keeper had fallen asleep and awoken to find himself face-to-face with a Catalyst who he *knows*, who he can *tell* had grown past his eighteenth birthday.

He had failed again.

This Catalyst makes four hundred and ninety-eight.

Of course, The Keeper remains calm in spite of the devastation he feels. "Hello," he greets warmly, and The Catalyst nods, keeping his head down. This is unlike The Catalyst. He has come to know The Catalyst as a spritely child, always over-enthusiastic and confident, loud and never quiet. Never this quiet. The Keeper tilts his head, trying to look The Catalyst in the eyes. "Do you know what happened to you?"

He cannot seem to see any Death Markings on this Catalyst; this has happened in the past, of course, with Catalysts that have been impaled, shot, or stabbed in places not visible by their clothing. The Keeper is guiltily thankful for these instances. It is not pleasant to know how four hundred and ninety-eight Catalysts have died.

The Catalyst does not look The Keeper in the eyes. "Obviously I know what happened," he murmurs, swallowing hard in spite of the lack of need; this Catalyst will never breathe again, never feel hunger, thirst, or pain. The Catalyst finally looks up, and The Keeper resists the urge to cry out. "I'm dead, aren't I?"

The Keeper does not answer. He is far too preoccupied with staring unabashedly at the ugly purple scarring that mars The Catalyst's

neck. This has never happened before. "Yes, you... you died," he stutters, and The Catalyst looks down again, the Markings vanishing from sight as he does. The Keeper's hands tremble. "What happened?"

The Catalyst does not respond. The Keeper hesitates to reach out. He is not sure how The Catalyst will react to touch. There have been many Catalysts that accept it without question, and far too many that flinch away. The Keeper has learned to let each Catalyst initiate touch first.

At last, The Catalyst looks up at him again, eyes more grey than blue, and The Keeper sucks in a non-existent breath. The Death Markings are not any easier to look at the second time. "Is it not obvious?" he asks, and The Keeper averts his gaze. The Catalyst shudders. "This place is fuckin' crowded, innit?"

The Keeper startles. "You can see them?" he demands in an astonished whisper, and The Catalyst's brow furrows as he shakes his head. Ah. The Keeper lets his shoulders fall. "Why'd you say it's crowded, then?"

"I can feel them," The Catalyst answers with another shudder, and The Keeper tilts his head curiously. This has never happened before either, but this Catalyst seems to have gone down a path far different from the others. "They're everywhere..."

The Keeper nods. "There are four hundred and ninety-seven other versions of you in The In-Between. It's understandably a little packed," he says, and The Catalyst glances out to what must be, for him, a completely empty white void. "You can ask me whatever questions you'd like, though I can't promise I'll answer all of them."

At that, The Catalyst seems to emote somewhat. He's been oddly stoic. Usually, Catalysts are expressive and bold, and this one seems like a shell of himself. The Keeper wonders what had happened to him. "Can you tell me who found my body?" he asks, and if The Keeper were currently physically capable of going pale, he would be.

The Keeper reaches out to The In-Between for the knowledge, and it

provides. The Keeper feels a sensation akin to his stomach lurching. "Your mother," he whispers, and The Catalyst's eyes slide shut in silent agony. "I'm sorry."

The Catalyst falls to his knees, and The Keeper starts to reach out, only to be startled back by relieved laughter. "It wasn't *him*," he says through a terrifying hybrid of relieved laughter and sobs, and The Keeper knows exactly who The Catalyst is talking about.

The Atrocity is the bane of The Keeper's existence.

He's a monster of terrifying proportion, a horror borne of science and delusion. The Atrocity plagues The Keeper constantly-he's mainly the reason that The Keeper's attempts at maintaining this reality have failed. The Atrocity is not stopped by anything but his own hubris, and even then, he has somehow managed to take The Catalyst down with him each and every time. The Keeper has never loathed a fellow being, but The Atrocity makes a fury as hot as a white iron run in The Keeper's veins.

The Atrocity had refused help at every turn, had let himself fester into a monster beyond saving, and this is not to say that The Keeper hasn't tried. He had once thought that the solution was to prevent The Atrocity from denying the help he so desperately needs, but he'd only returned to his home and choked The Catalyst until he'd died. The Keeper will never be able to describe the feeling that comes with looking a dead eight-year-old with hand marks around his neck in the eyes.

There isn't much that The Keeper is frightened of, nothing he hasn't experienced or seen in his travels across the paths of the universe, but The Atrocity is... a special case. No matter what The Keeper does, it's as if The Atrocity is destined to defy him, to worm his way around The Keeper's protections and enact this sick revenge fantasy of his on The Catalyst.

And, as it seems, this Catalyst had done the job himself before The Atrocity could. The Keeper gently puts a hand on The Catalyst's shoulder, and The Catalyst flinches violently. "What happened to you, Tommy?" he asks, because he's found that most Catalysts much prefer to be called by their given names and nicknames rather

than by their destined role.

“Who the hell is Tommy?” The Catalyst asks him, brows furrowed in earnest, and The Keeper stumbles back. No, this can’t be, this is The Catalyst, is it not? The Keeper reaches out to The In-Between for confirmation, and it tells him that yes, this *is* The Catalyst. Perhaps his name had simply been different in this timeline. “Are-sir, are you alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine,” The Keeper says. The Catalyst smiles uncertainly, and The Keeper offers him a hand up. “I’ll have to wake up in a bit. I hate to leave you so soon, but another Keeper should be here once he falls asleep. I’ll remember what he remembers, so don’t worry. And-if you’re alright with it, can you tell me... can you tell me why?”

The Catalyst smiles sadly. “I didn’t want him to win,” he says, and The Keeper feels nauseous.

Four hundred and ninety-eight.

The In-Between slips away, and Karl Jacobs wakes up.

The break room is Karl’s favorite place in the entire school.

He’s particularly fond of the courtyard as well, but he gets to talk with people in the break room, connect with them. Of course, his non-American colleagues call it a staff room, and Karl feels a little out of place still-growing pains, adjustment pains, whatever you want to call them. So he tends to take his breaks with the rest of the administrative staff.

He and Charlie had even managed to convince Quackity to join them today rather than him eating alone in his office. “My next game plan is to start getting city funds to upgrade the utilities,” Quackity says, feet kicked up onto a table, and Karl swats at his ankles fondly. In all of his time in this reality, he has to admit, the moments he spends with Quackity are some of his favorites. Charlie nods eagerly, and Quackity grins. “By the way, Karl, have you thought about my offer yet?”

Karl chuckles nervously and swirls his coffee around his mug. "I just dunno if the club scene's for me, man," he says, and Quackity pouts, stealing one of Charlie's fries. Charlie doesn't seem to mind at all. "Besides, I don't wanna be the odd one out while you're off running things and Charlie's presumably following you around."

"What am I, dead meat?" Fundy scoffs, and as Karl goes to apologize, Quackity affixes Fundy with a withering glare.

"Don't be an ass," he says, and Fundy picks at his lunch. Karl just sips on his coffee. Quackity turns his million dollar smile towards Karl-something that's happened quite a lot in every timeline where he's met Quackity. "Anyways, I would *love* to have you at Las Nevadas on Friday, and if that's what you're worried about, you don't have to be! I'm offering the rest of the staff a discount for that night, everybody'll be there. Plus, I've got someone I've been meaning to introduce you to."

Karl tilts his head with an amused smile. "Oh? Do tell," he says, and he nods in greeting as Sally comes in, presumably to grab a coffee before her next class starts. Quackity grins, swinging his feet off of the table and leaning so far forward that his nose touches Karl's. Karl chuckles.

"Well, my lovely little administrator, it's someone I've gotten to know *very* well recently," he says, and Karl raises an eyebrow. Quackity scrunches up his nose and then leans back, swatting idly at Charlie's hand as he goes to take one of Quackity's chips. "His name's Sapnap. Stand-up dude, you'd love him."

Fundy's brows furrow, and Karl glances at him. "Uh, Big Q, are you sure you want to bring *Karl* to meet him?" he asks, and Karl's learned not to take offense at that. He appears rather unassuming, after all, but he can handle it. "No offense, Karl, I just... think you should stick with the rest of the faculty that night."

Sally leans against the counter as her coffee brews, one of those delightful little pods that Karl had been rather fascinated with at the start of his attempt to keep this reality in check. She crosses her arms. "We're doing a faculty thing?" she asks, and Charlie nods enthusiastically.

"Yeah! Quackity from the front office is having all of us at the Las Nevadas club for a discounted price," he recites, and Quackity rolls his eyes good-naturedly. Charlie perks up. "Oh! Quackity from the front office, you should invite Mamacita from the hea-"

Quackity cuts him off with an elbow to the side, which Karl considers a little harsh, but he's seen him do far worse. "Sally, you oughta come, I think Wilbur's gonna be there," he says, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, and Karl shakes his head fondly. Always the meddler, his Quackity is. "I heard he might bring along the receptionist-what's her name again? Ah, right, I think it's Fran! You know her, don't you? The one with the curly blue hair?"

Sally's posture stiffens, and Karl resists the urge to laugh. He's been to far too many of Sally and Wilbur's weddings to be remotely surprised at this point. "You don't know for sure though?" she asks, and Quackity shrugs mock-innocently. Sally grabs her coffee and nods. "Thanks, Big Q. I've got a moron to go ask out, if you don't mind."

"Not at all," he says, and she marches out. Karl wonders if this timeline will be one of the good ones for her, or if it'll end in heartbreak. He hopes for the former. Quackity turns back to him, chin perched on his hand. "And *that*, gentlemen, is how you put Wilbur Soot even further into your debt."

Fundy snickers and munches idly on his salad, and Charlie nods, as if he's taking this advice to heart. Karl thinks he probably is. "What's the deal with you and Wilbur anyway?" Karl asks, slightly curious. If it's at all possible for this to-in some way-affect the timeline, he should know about it. "I have no idea why, but it's like he can't stand you."

Quackity hums, suddenly not so playful anymore. "He knows what he did," is his vague answer, and Karl's not in the mood to weasel an answer out of him. Quackity's phone buzzes, and he glances at it, frowning after a moment. Quackity hums and snaps his fingers a few times. "I have to go off campus to take care of something. Charlie, you're in charge. Fundy, don't misbehave."

Glaring at the ground, Fundy nods. As Quackity starts to leave, Karl

packs up his things and follows him out. "Um, Quackity, could I talk to you for a minute? I'll make it quick, I promise," he says, and Quackity nods, glancing around the hallway. They're alone. Karl clears his throat, brows furrowed. "Right, I was... I think we should recommend counseling for one of our students. His name's Tommy, you know him, he's Wilbur's brother."

The impatience on Quackity's face melts away. "What's going on? Is everything okay with the kid?" he asks, and Karl had almost forgotten how fond of Tommy that Quackity is in nearly every timeline. "Has he said something to you?"

"No, he hasn't. Not directly, anyway, but... he got startled the other day and squeezed a soda can so hard that it broke as a stress response or something, and when I told that to Wilbur, he'd gotten really upset and said that Tommy's been having a lot of panic attacks lately," he says, and Quackity frowns in concern, crossing his arms. "And you know Wilbur, when he starts talking he... doesn't stop. Tommy's grades were slipping a little while ago, and he's been super overwhelmed when it comes to getting results back."

"Well, shit," Quackity mumbles, gnawing at his bottom lip. Karl wants to reach out and comfort him, but he doesn't know whether or not they're close enough in this timeline yet. In any case, he's not breaking any of The Rules, he's not interfering directly, and if he can avoid a repeat of four hundred and ninety-eight, he's going to. Quackity sighs. "I'll see what I can do after I take care of what I've got to take care of. Thanks for telling me, Karl."

"Yeah, man, of course," Karl says easily, and Quackity gives his shoulder a pat before he heads down the hallway and out of sight. Well, that's that out of the way, he supposes.

It's not that he's exactly *eager* to use his knowledge of the various timelines to his advantage, but Karl's a little tired of playing fair, if he's being honest with himself. It's not as though The Atrocity has played by The Rules, and Karl will be damned if he has to sit through the initial stages all over again.

He isn't exactly *proud* that he views each new timeline as a chance to start over, because it isn't, not really. He's reminded of that fact

every time he looks out at the sea of the faces of his failures. But each timeline is an opportunity for him to try and shield Tommy from unnecessary pain and hardship.

Karl is only supposed to fix this reality so that it follows the proper path the universe has set for it, but he's not *not* allowed to make the things he *can* change as harmless as possible. After all, this could technically be considered an attempt at fixing whatever had been wrong with timeline four hundred and ninety-eight.

Maybe if *that* Tommy had gotten help...

Well, it's too late to fix that timeline now, and Karl can still fix this one.

There's no use in mourning for the timelines at this point. Sure, Karl had done his fair share of grieving for the first dozen or so failures, and he had always felt unsettled and upset when Tommy had arrived in The In-Between any younger than sixteen-because in some versions of the timelines, Tommy gets his powers even younger, because The Atrocity starts experimenting sooner. It never works out.

Besides, Karl has been through enough realities and far too many timelines to get snagged on little things like these now. He's determined to get it right this time around; Karl is tired of playing the same roles, the same games. He enjoys himself when he can, really, he does, but those moments come far and few when things actually begin to kick off.

Karl is just laying in wait for The Atrocity.

He never wins, of course, because in this reality-in *every* reality-Atrocities have no place in their worlds. There's no reason for The Atrocity to have continued to choose the same form throughout each of these timelines, though, which is what Karl is mainly concerned with. It could have chosen a far more powerful form, but it has remained in the same body since this reality had initially been endangered.

Will that make him easier to defeat this time around?

It's not as if Karl is at liberty to share any of the gathered information he has. If he does, he'll have to face the consequences of breaking The Rules, and the last time one of his kind had, it was said that the screams hadn't ceased for a millennia.

So sue him if Karl's a little paranoid about breaking The Rules.

But this progress, it's good. He can continue to nudge support towards Tommy, to allow him to grow and improve. He's seen far too many Tommys that had died alone and terrified. As of right now, that doesn't seem to be a possibility; Karl's been keeping a careful watch, and he's fairly certain that at least one person knows about Tommy's powers. Karl has to hope that his interference will be enough.

He has no choice left but to hope.

Hooooo boy, Karl's a little in over his head with this one. He's doing the best he can, though!

Also, some of y'all are speculating on who's going to find out Tommy's identity next, and I'm just sitting here cackling because you're never gonna see it coming.

I love reading your comments and seeing all your theories, and I really hope you guys liked this chapter!

VOS

Chapter 26: vos

Tommy faces his biggest fear: being told he needs help. He also fights a supervillain.

Y'all's theories are *so* much fun to read! Some of you have been pretty close, too, lmao!

Also I wanted to thank you guys for 875 kudos??? Holy shit??? And 20k hits??? That's insane!!!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

There's a ridiculous amount of food in Tommy's lunch today.

He suspects it's probably the work of both Techno *and* Wilbur, considering there's a bunch of stuff he actually likes in addition to a ton of sweets from Wilbur's secret stash. "Fellas, help yourselves," Tommy says, pushing the majority of the sweets towards Tubbo and Ranboo, who immediately start to sort through them. Tommy shakes his head. "They're such dickheads."

"Who, your brothers?" Ranboo asks, opening up a package of chocolate candies, and Tommy nods. Tubbo rips the plastic away from a pack of cookies with his teeth ferociously, and both Ranboo and Tommy give him a wary look. Ranboo nudges Tubbo and, probably thinking he's being subtle and quiet enough that Tommy won't hear, starts to ask about Spider-Man. "You're still being safe

with... that whole thing, right?"

Tubbo makes eye contact with Tommy, and Tommy bites down on his tongue to keep himself from bursting out into laughter. "Yeah, bossman, my Spider-Man business is all good," Tubbo says, and Ranboo's eyes go wide at his casual tone, whipping his head around, presumably to make sure that nobody had been paying attention.

"Wh-! You can't just say that!" Ranboo hisses, and Tubbo and Tommy both burst into laughter, leaving Ranboo completely confused. Tommy buries his head in his arms on the table and tries to compose himself, but then Ranboo starts talking again. "Tubbo, what-are-you-does *Tommy* know?! What are you laughing at?!"

Choking on his laughter, Tubbo slaps the table with an open palm, and Tommy straightens up as he tries to quell his own guffawing. "Oh, Tommy *knows* alright," Tubbo says through his cackles, and Tommy kicks his ankles. "He's the one who *convinced* Spider-Man!"

Ranboo's jaw drops, and Tommy holds back a laugh at how utterly shocked he looks. "Are you kidding me?!" he whisper-yells, and Tommy nods. Tubbo's cackling is *not* helping him take this remotely seriously. "Tommy, what the hell?!"

"I was just doing a *very* nice thing for my friend, Ranboo. His dreams have come true," Tommy says, and he finally breaks, slapping the table as Tubbo practically folds in half laughing. Ranboo is rather unamused, as it seems. Tommy clears his throat and sobers up. "No, no, seriously, I've practically nothing to do with it, Ranboo, I swear."

Tubbo laughs harder at that, and Tommy kicks at his ankles again. They're *really* not doing great at the whole secret identity thing. "Oh, you had nothing to do with it, did you?" Tubbo asks, and Tommy so wants to laugh, but Ranboo is currently still glaring at him, and Tommy kinda feels like if he *does* laugh, Ranboo will throttle him. Tubbo calms himself down and waves dismissively. "We're just joking around, Tommy just got saved by Spider-Man one time and told him about me, that was just the thing that made Spider-Man decide to talk to me about it."

Tommy silently commends Tubbo's quick thinking.

Still not pleased, but seemingly less pissed, Ranboo nods. "Alright. But I'm only letting it go because you brought us snacks," he says, pointing a threatening finger in Tommy's direction, and Tommy puts his hands up in surrender. "Anyways, what are you guys doing after school? I got the day off from Puffy, so-"

"Tommy Watson to the front office," the PA interrupts, and the trio abruptly freezes, staring at each other with wide eyes. Tommy's got no fucking *clue* what that's about. *"Tommy Watson to the front office, please."*

Well *that* isn't ominous at all.

"D'you've any idea what's going on?" Tubbo asks as Tommy starts to pack up his stuff, and Tommy shrugs helplessly. His grades have gone up, he's not gotten in trouble-though that's mostly because he's learned how to work around Fundy's weirdly vigilant habits-and he honestly can't think of anything. "Well, shit, bossman, are you gonna be sent home?"

"I fuckin' hope not, we've got that project in Sam's class to work on," Tommy grumbles, and he gives them both a half-hearted wave as he starts to head out of the lunchroom.

The hallways are quiet; he passes by a couple of teachers on his way, but there's no one he's familiar enough with to stop and have a chat. Tommy's only been in the front office a handful of times, and only once was he there because he'd gotten in trouble. The front office itself is always a relatively nice place-the receptionist is a really nice lady, but Tommy can never remember her name for the life of him.

As he ducks into the front office, one hand in his pocket, the receptionist-her nametag reads *Fran D.*, that's right-gives him a polite little wave. She must've redyed her hair; it's a much brighter blue than Tommy remembers. "Hey there, Tommy! You can head on back to Big Q's office, he and your mum are waiting in there already," Fran says, and Tommy blinks in surprise, but he nods and starts walking towards Quackity's office.

Kristin's here? Why the fuck would she take off work to come here? Does this mean Tommy's actually in deep shit? He can't even remember if he's done anything wrong! Damn, his hands are shaking again. Tommy takes a deep breath and knocks before he opens the door. He can't hear any conversation, but it can't hurt to be polite, *especially* if he's somehow gotten in trouble.

When he steps into the room, he's only a little taken aback at Karl's presence. Had he somehow pissed Karl off? Is that why he's here? "Tommy, come on in and take a seat," Quackity says, and Tommy settles into the chair next to Kristin, who looks really worried. Quackity leans forward a little and folds his hands on the desk. "Do you know why we called you in here today?"

Glancing back and forth between Kristin and Karl, hoping for *some* kind of hint, Tommy shakes his head. "Am I in trouble or some shit, Big Q?" he asks with a nervous laugh, and the sad smile he receives in turn makes him about six thousand times more anxious. "Sorry, I don't-if I *did* do something, I can't remember, that's my bad."

"You haven't done anything wrong," Kristin reassures him, a hand on his arm, and Tommy relaxes minutely. At least Kristin's not pissed at him. She exchanges a look with Quackity and gives his arm a squeeze. "Your headteacher is just... some concerning things have been brought to his attention, and he called us both in to discuss the possibility of you..."

She trails off and looks to Quackity again. "Tommy, we want to offer you counseling sessions on campus," he says, and Tommy's brow furrows. Counseling sessions? Where the hell is *this* coming from? Karl nods solemnly, and Quackity clears his throat. "There are a few worrying things and some concerns that I've been told about by multiple people-and I'd offer this same thing to any other students struggling-and I think it's best to make sure you're getting the help you need."

Tommy huffs out a disbelieving laugh. "Wh-I don't need *counseling*, I'm... I'm fine," he says, curling back slightly into his chair. Kristin frowns, and Tommy laughs again. It sounds nervous, so he clears his throat. "Seriously, guys, I don't-I really am fine, it's not... I don't need a counselor, I'm not..."

"Buddy, you've been having panic attacks," Quackity says gently, and Tommy gets a little defensive at that, because *everyone's* been saying that, and he hasn't been, nobody listens to him when he says he doesn't have them. "We just want to make sure you're getting whatever help might be necessary, Tommy."

"It's just once a week, and if you'd prefer to meet with someone off campus, Phil and I are more than happy to take you," Kristin says, equally as soft, like everyone's afraid Tommy's going to break or some shit, and Tommy's starting to think he doesn't actually have a say in this. "You won't have to talk about anything you don't want to, but this'll be good for you."

"Wh-Kristin, you can't possibly think that I-I don't need a therapist, I'm *fine*," Tommy emphasizes, and they just keep looking at him sadly, like he's an idiot and can't recognize when he needs help and when he doesn't. "No, I mean it, I haven't even gotten anxious in the past few days, I don't need counseling sessions!"

Quackity sighs. "I figured you might say that, if what I discussed with Wilbur was any indication," he says, and Tommy scoffs. Wilbur *hates* Quackity, for whatever reason, there's no way he'd be open to talking about anything, let alone about Tommy. Quackity's brows furrow, and he looks right into Tommy's eyes. "We're all worried about you, Tommy. I can't make the counseling mandatory, nor can I force you to attend on campus without your consent, but your parents *can* make the decision to have you attend therapy sessions off campus."

Tommy turns to Kristin, who stares right back at him with determined eyes. *No*, there's no way she's going to make him go, he doesn't *need* to go, she *knows* that- "I'll drive you after school on Wednesdays," she says, and Tommy's heart drops to his stomach. You've got to be fucking kidding him. "Quackity recommended a *great* therapist, his name's Bad, he specializes in anxiety disorders-

"I'm not-! I've not got an anxiety problem!" Tommy protests, and in spite of his best wishes, his hands have started to shake again. Quackity and Kristin are just looking at him like he's someone to be *pitied*, like he's in denial or some shit. "I *don't!* I'm fucking fine!"

Kristin and Quackity exchange another look. "We'll be accommodating your appointments, you'll receive no absence penalties for leaving a little early on Wednesdays," Quackity says gently, and Tommy slumps back in the chair, disbelieving.

Kristin brushes a lock of Tommy's hair behind his ear. "It'll be alright, bubs. This is gonna be good for you," she says, and Tommy crosses his arms.

He doubts it, but it seems like nobody really wants to hear his thoughts on the matter.

Tommy is perched on a rooftop, and he's still fucking fuming.

"What's got you so pissed for, bossman?" Tubbo asks, clearly amused, and Tommy clicks his tongue, eyes still narrowed as he scans the streets. He could really use fighting a few crimes as a way to channel his frustrated energy into something productive, but as it seems, every common criminal in London is currently in hiding. *"Alright, don't answer then, I guess. But you should know, I've got a listing for a hitman, supposedly set up in an abandoned building in that district that they're re-doing down by the warehouse."*

Thank fucking God. "Right, I'm on it," Tommy says, swinging towards the address that Tubbo sends him. Maybe he's going a little faster than he'd normally go, but that's his business, nobody else's. Tubbo hums something-Tommy's not entirely sure if it's an actual song, but it's kind of nice-and Tommy swings past a park, shooting a thumbs-up to the pedestrians. He's pretty close to the building now, but he's still really pissed off, and he's been trying his best not to keep things from Tubbo anymore. "... I'm mad because Kristin's forcing me to go to a therapist."

Tubbo snorts. *"Good,"* he says, and Tommy scoffs, a bit offended at that. He knows Tubbo *thinks* he's been having panic attacks, despite the fact that Tommy very much doesn't have them. *"You are in desperate need of some therapy, Tommy."*

"Why does everybody keep *saying* that?" Tommy mutters under his

breath as he lands on the roof of the abandoned building. Tubbo doesn't answer. "Right, what exactly are we dealing with here, Big T?"

"The hit isn't specified, but it looks like the listing's between the usual suspects," Tubbo tells him, the telltale noise of his typing sounding off in the background. How lovely, which one is Tommy dealing with today? A bioweapons terrorist, or a monstrous symbiote? Maybe God would love to spite him and throw the arsonist in the mix too. *"Blaze ordered a hit under his main alias for today at four in the afternoon, which means the sniper-oh, fun, we get specificity this time-is gonna be setting up just about now."*

Tommy nods and slips through the unlocked door, careful to keep his footsteps silent as he descends the stairs. He hops onto the ceiling as he gets to the top floor, creeping steadily through each of the empty rooms. There are a few shabby pieces of furniture here and there, but other than the walls, there's nothing in his way.

The building's really fucking eerie, though. It's cold-though Tommy could probably just attribute that to weather typical of London in November-and there's this weird, heavy atmosphere that's lingering in the air. The Sense is on edge; something's clearly wrong here, and Tommy feels like he's about to find out just what it is.

He crawls towards the last of the rooms and peeks his head in through the doorway. There's someone in there with a *lot* of equipment. "Hive, what am I looking at?" Tommy whispers, and the person stiffens, then goes back to their work.

"That's our guy. I still haven't managed to find out who the hit's been ordered on, but apparently this guy's got a reputation as the best in the business. I know he's tied to Boss, probably one of the fuckers you saw during the trade-off," Tubbo tells him, and Tommy narrows his eyes. This guy seems like a normal motherfucker, he's not dressed in any crazy outfits or anything.

The guy is in tactical gear, sure, and there's something sticking off of his face that looks vaguely like a mask, but that makes sense to have when you're apparently a notorious criminal. Tommy's fairly certain that it's not Boss, given the absence of the gauntlet, and it's

definitely not Slime, so it's gotta be Vos, right?

There are some metallic clicks, a few sounds of the sliding and *click clack* of parts being put on and taken off. Tommy wonders who the hell would warrant this kind of setup. Presumably-Vos starts to put things back in the black bag on the ground next to him, and Tommy creeps ever closer, taking great care not to make a sound. Presumably-Vos stiffens every fucking time he moves, though, which is incredibly inconvenient.

"I suggest you run, spider," Vos-it's definitely him-says coolly as Tommy drops down silently from the ceiling, and that's just fucking unfair, innit? He's still putting equipment away, which, in Tommy's opinion, is a stupid thing to do when you've got your back turned to a superhero. He fires a web out at Vos, who fucking *disappears* in a plume of smoke. "How irritating."

The voice had come from behind him. Ah, shit.

Tommy barely ducks out of the way as the ass end of a pistol jabs towards where his head had just been, and he glances over at the rifle perched pristinely in the window. "Would be a right shame for your gun to fall out the window," he says, grinning as he dodges another-really precise, holy shit-swing from Vos. He leaps backwards and starts to grab the rifle when Vos disappears and reappears in two separate plumes of smoke, and then Tommy is across the room again. "Okay, seriously, you have *got* to tell me how you do that, it's really fuckin' cool!"

He finally gets a good look at Vos, who, aside from the sleek fox mask hiding his face, just looks like an ordinary guy in an all-black outfit. Nothing identifying like a tattoo or scar, sadly. "I am once again suggesting you run," Vos says, "or you might not make it in time."

"Make it to what?" Tommy asks, and he gets into a fighting stance, right foot back and fists up. If this Vos guy thinks he's gonna give up, he's got another thing coming. He dashes forward and aims a kick for Vos's side, jumping out of the way as Vos swings a fist towards his face. "What's with the fox mask, pal? Going for the Nick Wilde aesthetic? Can't say I fully understand, but that *was* a pretty good

movie.”

Vos’s stance falters slightly, and Tommy gets in a decent hit. “My motif has nothing to do with a children’s movie, you-!” Vos cuts himself off, clearly trying to maintain the whole mysterious schtick, but if it’s *this* easy to get under his skin, this fight’s gonna be a piece of cake. Vos’s head lowers minutely, and he aims his pistol at Tommy. “I’ve had enough of this.”

Tommy dives to the right as Vos fires, and the bullet whizzes by his shoulder. “*Uh, Tommy? I think I found out who the target is,*” Tubbo says, sounding rather panicked, and Tommy can’t exactly tell him that now isn’t a good time, considering he’s trying to keep the supervillains from knowing that someone’s on comms with him.

“Very unoriginal there, mate, I’ve been shot at before. At least put a little pizazz in it, shoot me with exploding bullets or some shit,” Tommy says, landing a punch on Vos’s jaw, and Vos stumbles back, the gun spinning around his finger before it fires again, and Tommy just barely ducks out of the way. “See, *that* was cool! Do more of that!”

“You sound like a *child*,” Vos snarls, holstering his gun and pulling out a knife that-oh, great, it’s not a knife, it’s a fucking staff with blades on either end, a ribbon of orange light that matches the fox mask spiraling around the black pole. Vos slashes it once through the air, stance defensive, and the two of them steadily circle each other. Tommy’s not got any shielding; if the blade hits him, he’ll be cut, unless it ricochets off of the exoskeletal boning. Heh. Boning. That never gets old. Vos flips the staff between his fingers. “Are you afraid to approach me, spider?”

Tommy gestures towards his mask. “I mean, not really, you’re kind of a furry, aren’t you?” he quips, and Vos makes an offended squawk of a noise. Tommy stifles a laugh. “Yeah, got the fox thing going on, you’re a right furry, you are.”

“I am not a-!” Vos cuts himself off again-Tommy makes a mental note that he’s done it twice now-and shakes his head, squaring his shoulders. He dashes towards Tommy and sweeps the staff down, and Tommy throws up his arm to block it, kicking out at Vos’s legs.

He misses, unfortunately, which means the cut in his arm was for nothing. Vos shifts into a defensive position as Tommy kicks at the staff again. It doesn't budge.

Tommy jumps back as Vos slashes the blades towards him. "Really got me on the defensive here, fox boy," he says, laughing as Vos gets visibly annoyed and makes a stupid decision to swing towards him again without steadying himself. Tommy kicks at his shin, and Vos tenses up. "Ah, it's alright, nobody does too well in their first fight against me! No worries, though, I'll wrap it up quick and you can walk home with your tail between your legs like a good little furry."

"You little shit," Vos growls, and there's a plume of smoke. Tommy immediately goes on guard, hopping up towards the ceiling just in time to avoid being impaled by the staff. He drops down, heel aimed at Vos's wrist, and it connects. The staff clatters to the ground, and Tommy kicks it away. Vos lifts a hand to his ear and presses a finger to it. "I need backup, the spider's here, and he's giving me trouble!"

"You and your colleagues have either got to come up with some creative nicknames or learn my actual name," Tommy says, slightly annoyed, and he throws a punch towards Vos, only for it to be caught. This, however, leaves Vos open, considering he's grabbed Tommy's arm with both hands, and Tommy grabs his face with his free hand and shoves the both of them towards the wall. The mask slips slightly, and Tommy gets a glimpse at a few freckles on Vos's cheek. At least that's semi-identifying. "C'mon, Fantastic Mr. Fox, just give it up! No murder for you today."

Vos jams a knee into Tommy's stomach, and Tommy stumbles back, clutching at his side with one hand. The Sense screeches in the back of his head for him to turn around, and Tommy does, eyes widening as he's met with the whirring body of a drone. "Send my sincerest thanks to our kind friend Blaze," Vos says behind him, and Tommy grabs the drone, chucking it towards Vos, who disappears in a plume of smoke again, though when he reappears, he looks rather winded.

Tommy ducks out of the way as the drone starts to fire at him, and he webs it, spinning it off its course and taking the opportunity while

it rights itself to aim another few hits at Vos, who struggles to block them. "Getting a bit tired, are we?" Tommy jeers, and Vos shoves at him hard, sending him stumbling back a little. Tommy fires off another web at the drone, and he and Vos dance around the bullets that are fired at their feet. "C'mon, pal, I don't think you can do this all day."

"Try me," Vos says, though he's even starting to *sound* out of breath, and Tommy watches as his hand twitches towards his belt.

Smoke fills the room, and Tommy barely has time to react before he's launched backwards by something *far* too strong to be Vos. It must be the strength of more drones, because it takes Tommy a good ten seconds to stand up fully again. "*Tommy*," Tubbo starts, and Tommy shakes his head. He doesn't know whether or not the drones are recording, he doesn't want to risk anything. He doesn't want to risk Tubbo's safety even more.

He staggers towards what he hopes is the direction of the room Vos is still in. The smoke is ridiculously thick, suffocating almost, and Tommy coughs as he sweeps it out of the way. He can make out Vos's form at the far end of the room. "Hey! Dickhead! You think a little smog's gonna fuckin' stop me?!" Tommy shouts, and while Vos stiffens, he doesn't move.

Tommy's eyes widen.

The gun goes off.

There's screaming in the distance, and Tommy dashes forward, making a mad grab for Vos, only to be met with more fucking smoke. Vos is gone, but the drones aren't. The Sense screams at the back of his mind, and Tommy dives out of the window as the smoke ripples with the force of a *massive* explosion.

Well, fuck. Tommy starts to swing around the nearby buildings, trying to keep an eye out for Vos, but there's no sign of him. And, as he comes full-circle, the rifle and the bag of equipment are gone as well. Tubbo has gone silent, but Tommy's paying no mind to that, instead swinging towards the source of the distant screams.

He can't believe he'd let *another* wrong'un get away. This is such bullshit! He'd had Vos on the ropes before Blaze's stupid drones had come in. That furry fuck had been about to give in, and if it hadn't been for them teaming up out of goddamned nowhere, Tommy would've been able to capture Vos and turn him over to the proper authorities! It would've been one less shithead villain for him to be dealing with, but nothing can ever be that easy for him, can it?

Of course, Tommy expects that his next encounter with Vos will be much more difficult, all things considered. It had been really obvious that with whatever tech Vos is using for those smoke bombs, he's not used to the side effects. Now that he knows his limits, he'll probably be more strategic with their usage, meaning Tommy will have to put up with even more bullshit the next time they fight.

Then again, he's also got an advantage now that he knows that Vos is working with both Boss *and* Blaze-and presumably Slime and 404 by extension. He can plan for the next time, make sure he has some kind of cover or tactics for the drones. Tubbo's already given him the gas mask, so Tommy's not entirely worried about 404 being an issue so much as a distraction. The electricity that Boss uses is annoying, but Tommy's pretty sure he could convince Tubbo to line his suit with some kind of secret rubber insulation so the shocks aren't as bad as they'd been in the hall of mirrors.

At this point, Tommy's got a decent idea of the weaponry he can come to expect from the usual suspects. Blaze prefers to use knives up close and resorts to drones or guns if he's in a bind or if he's long range, and 404's only got that stupid spore gun. Both of them are fairly easy to take down, but there's always a backup plan that they can fall back on in order to slip away from him, which is incredibly irritating. Boss's electrical gauntlet is the only weapon of his that Tommy knows of, but it's strong enough that he's fairly certain Boss won't be using any others. Then, obviously, Slime doesn't need weapons, and Tommy's webs don't work on him, so he'll have to find some way around that.

Vos has arguably the most versatile weapons he's seen thus far, and Tommy hadn't even gotten a good look at the equipment he'd had with him before he'd stashed it. That staff is annoyingly cool, and it's got a ton of potential uses in both melee and long range

combat. Tommy huffs out a laugh to himself at that thought; spending so much time with Techno has turned him into a weapons nerd.

It's also clear to him that Vos is *heavily* trained with firearms. That sniper rifle, while an incredibly deadly and horrifying weapon, had been seriously tricked out. Vos had looked the most comfortable holding a gun, which is why Tommy finds it so weird that his pistol had been holstered so soon into their fight. After all, he's pretty sure Vos wants him dead, and the furry comments certainly hadn't helped convince him Tommy should be living.

Tommy realizes he's been alone with his thoughts for an odd amount of time, and he wonders if Tubbo's okay. He's probably just gotten up to take a piss or grab a glass of water or something, but he usually says he'll be right back if he's leaving the room. Maybe he's just waiting for Tommy to get to the scene of the hit so that he can assist from there.

It's probably fine. Tommy should really stop overthinking things.

As he swings by a massive crowd, Tommy lands atop a nearby building and looks out over the sea of people. He can't really tell what's going on, but the crowd is being corralled back by a bunch of security officers, and there are a ton of people surrounding *something* by a podium, and Tommy blinks in surprise as an ambulance rushes in.

Tommy lands near the stage, hands going up as soon as several guns immediately train on him. "Woah, woah, fellas, I'm here to help," he says, but they don't lower their guns. "Seriously, I'm trying to help you, what's going on?!"

The security officers abruptly turn away from him, offering no explanation, and Tommy tries to take a look at the thing that's being surrounded, but nobody will let him by. He backs up and starts to offer help with crowd control, only to be glared at by the commanding officer. "You're too late, Spider-Man," he says, and Tommy blinks at him. "Get out of here, you're just causing more of a scene."

"I swear, I won't cause you any trouble, I just want to help, is there anything I can do? I'm great with crowds, and if anyone needs medical assistance, my webs can be used to stop bleeding in cases of emergency," Tommy offers, and the commanding officer scoffs at him. Fucking prick. Tommy's literally just trying to help him out here.

"Get the hell out of here before I tell my men you're a threat that needs to be neutralized," he says, and Tommy blinks in surprise. "You've got five minutes to get your stupid mask out of my sight."

"Alright, geez, no need for death threats, asshole," Tommy mutters, and he swings up and over the crowd, landing on that same rooftop as before. He sighs and crosses his arms. "What's going on down there, man?"

Tubbo's still eerily silent, but he clears his throat after a moment. "*I figured out who the hit was on,*" he says, really shakily, and Tommy's brows furrow in concern.

There's more sirens. "Tubbo? Who was it? Who got shot?" Tommy asks, suddenly fearing for the worst at Tubbo's shaky breathing.

"The mayor of London was just assassinated."

Boy oh boy, can anyone else sense the upcoming tension? Because / certainly can!

is this therapy?

Chapter 27: is this therapy?

Tommy finally gets some sense knocked into him and goes to therapy.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Tommy has been sitting in his room for the past three days.

Three days, of course, being the amount of time that they've had off from school. Techno's been bringing him meals, which is rather nice. He's hardly got an appetite, though; how's he meant to eat when this has happened? Everything's just... royally fucked up. So, Tommy's brain has, naturally, decided to take a nice long break from reality, which is why he's been sitting in bed for three days.

Apparently, this has greatly concerned Tubbo, who is now pounding on his bedroom door and demanding to be let in. "C'mon, bossman, don't make me kick the door down!" he shouts, and Tommy just keeps staring down at his hands. There's some muffled conversation out in the hall for a moment-Tommy's ears feel like they're stuffed with cotton-and then the lock in his door clicks. Of *course* Tubbo's gone and picked the lock. "Tommy, I swear to god-"

"Hey," Techno says gently, and Tommy looks up at him. Surely, *surely*, Techno will tell him what to do, where to go from here. Techno sits next to him, and Tubbo shuts the door quietly, which Tommy appreciates. Techno puts a hand on Tommy's shoulder. "It's not your fault, and I know you're blamin' yourself, but there's nothin' more you could've done."

"I could've listened to Vos when he said I might not make it in time,"

Tommy says, hollow, and Tubbo's eyes slide shut. Tommy looks to Techno, grief and guilt bubbling in his gut. "I was too late, Tech. I should've left when I had the chance, I shouldn't have dragged the fight out, I... or maybe I *should've* dragged it out more, maybe the mayor would've finished his speech, I should've done *more*, I..."

He trails off, burying his face in his hands. Techno's hand squeezes his shoulder. "You did good, you did all that you could do, kid," he says, and Tommy wants to believe that, really, he does, but... that's just untrue. If he'd gotten up faster after the drones had pushed him back, if he'd dodged a few more hits, maybe the mayor wouldn't have died. Techno sighs. "Tommy, you couldn't have known."

Tommy shakes his head and looks up from his hands again. Tubbo steps forward and flicks the center of his forehead. "Stop being an idiot, we couldn't have predicted he'd use so many smoke bombs at once. And I need you focused if we're gonna look into that tip about another potential deal that's going down on Friday," he says, though there's underlying worry in the scolding, and Tommy looks away. "It's not your fucking fault, Tommy, not any more than it's mine for not finding out who the target was sooner."

"That's not your fault, though, that shit's encrypted to hell and back, don't blame yourself," he says automatically, and both Techno and Tubbo give him a flat look. Tommy groans and stands, starting to pace along the length of his room. "No, you don't get it, I *could* have done more, I should've just pushed ahead through the smoke instead of trying to see through it, I-"

"You could've gotten shot by a drone or stabbed by Vos if you had," Tubbo cuts in, and Tommy shakes his head. He would have healed from that, and it had been clear that Vos hadn't wanted him *dead*, he probably would just have been shot or stabbed in a non-lethal place, there isn't an excuse. Tubbo interrupts his pacing by grabbing him by the shoulders. "Stop being a self-flagellating moron and blaming yourself, it's not your fucking fault!"

Techno runs a hand through his hair. "Alright, let's not be so *harsh*, but Tubbo's right, you gotta stop blamin' yourself," he says, and Tubbo steps back, crossing his arms. Tommy just huffs out a disbelieving scoff and turns away. Techno gently puts an arm

around his shoulders. "I'm serious, kid, you did the best you could. There's some people you just can't save no matter what you do, no matter how hard you try, and that's because you're human, just like everyone else."

Nodding eagerly, Tubbo gestures towards Techno. "See? Neither of us blame you, the public likely doesn't blame you, and if they do, they're morons," he says, and Tommy stays silent. He doesn't want to argue about this anymore. They're probably just saying this to make him feel better about it. Tubbo seems to sense this train of thought, and he smacks Tommy upside the head. "Enough with the pity party already! Do you or do you not trust what me and Techno have to say?"

Tommy crosses his arms, shoulders up by his ears. "Of course I do," he says, because he does, he really values their opinions, no matter what he might say otherwise, "but that doesn't mean-

"So trust us," Tubbo says, steamrolling over Tommy's continuous attempts to explain that this is, in fact, his fault, "when we tell you that it's not your fault. If it's your fault, then it must be mine as well since I was in charge of finding out who was going to be killed. And you don't think any part of this was my fault, do you?"

Tommy shakes his head, because of course it's not Tubbo's fault. "Then listen to us," Techno tells him, and Tommy nods. He supposes they've got a point; if he'd left to try and save the mayor, Vos would have just taken the shot, and if he'd tried to drag it out, Blaze just would've sent more drones to stop him. Techno gives him a soft grin. "There you go, I can hear those gears turnin' in your head now."

"A truly rare occurrence," Tubbo jokes, and Tommy flips him off with a weak smile. Tubbo claps a hand on his shoulder and nods towards the door. "Let's go grab food, I'm fuckin' starving and you probably are too."

Techno takes his arm off of Tommy's shoulders, and the three of them make their way downstairs. Tubbo and Tommy sit down at the kitchen table, and Tommy tenses up at the sound of the news playing in the living room, his nervousness only worsened at Wilbur

scoffing from that same room. “Unbelievable, absolutely unbelievable,” he says as he joins them in the kitchen, and Tommy pointedly keeps his gaze on the table as Techno starts to grab the two of them something to eat. Wilbur shakes his head and sits down next to him. “Have you three heard the news yet?”

Tommy doesn't answer, and Tubbo hums. “The thing with the mayor?” he asks, feigning ignorance, and Wilbur nods, still looking rather annoyed. Tommy sinks lower in his seat. Tubbo gives him a wary look. “Yeah, it's a real tragic accident. Don't know where the city's gonna go from here, I hope they say something soon, though.”

Carding his fingers through his hair, Wilbur tuts. “You know, Spider-Man was *on the scene*, and he left after two fucking minutes. Some *hero* that guy is, can't even lend a hand to the cops being overwhelmed with a panicked crowd,” he says, and Tommy would love it if the universe could drag him down into the center of the earth right about now. Techno stiffens, and Wilbur sighs at him. “I know you're a fan of the guy, Tech, but seriously, he's fallen off.”

“Actually,” Tubbo says, positively venomous, and Tommy momentarily fears for Wilbur's general safety, “I heard the cops wouldn't *let* him help. He offered, but they told him to get away from the scene.”

At that, Wilbur actually gives pause, and Techno hands Tommy and Tubbo a plate of sandwiches each. “I hadn't known that,” Wilbur admits, and Tommy briefly hopes that this discussion won't end in another argument, but he is woefully proven wrong almost immediately. “That makes sense, though, all things considered. Now that I think about it, he clearly doesn't give a shit about police protocol, *and* he hadn't done anything to protect the mayor.”

Techno looks *pissed*, and Tommy slumps down further in his seat. Techno crosses his arms, and Wilbur seems almost amused. This doesn't bode well. “You know, maybe you shouldn't give the guy so much flak, Wil,” Techno says, surprisingly measured, and Tommy's a little relieved that he's at least trying to keep the peace.

“I mean, yeah, he makes mistakes, sure, he's allowed that, but letting the mayor get assassinated? And they're saying in the

autopsy that they're specialized bullets from no weapon we've seen before, and Tubbo, you did that interview with the guy where he said he'd been investigating some black market weapons deals, I'm surprised you're still on his side about this, considering, logically, he should have been on top of things," Wilbur says, and Tommy's leg starts to bounce. Tubbo glares at Wilbur, but he continues on as though he's got no clue half the people in the room have somewhat murderous intent at the moment. "I like what he does for the community, don't get me wrong, but he's not magically above criticism just because he's gone viral as an illegal vigilante."

"He's my age, did you know that?" Tubbo says, and Wilbur goes a little pale. Tommy feels a little bad for finding vindication in it. Tubbo stands from his seat and towers over the kitchen table-it's intimidating. "If you'd ever had one conversation with the guy, he goes from talking seriously about how much he wants to keep his community safe to joking about his maths work being due tomorrow. He's a *good person* and he's doing his best, why the hell should all the fault of an unavoidable tragedy be on him?!"

"I'm not *saying* it's all his fault, Tubbo, I'm wondering why he hadn't done more," Wilbur says, and Techno slams the fridge shut a little harder than he'd normally close it. "You're both Spider-Man fanboys, of course you're not open to admitting he's made a mistake. But Tommy gets it, right, Tommy?"

"Oh, I don't..." Tommy trails off, hands up in surrender by his chest. The three of them are staring at him. "I want no part of this, Wil."

Wilbur clicks his tongue and turns back to Techno. "You're such a practical guy, I just don't understand why you won't admit it when Spider-Man fucks up," he says, and Tommy *really* wants this conversation to stop. Wilbur gives Techno a placating look, which is *not* good, because Techno clearly hates it. "I'm not saying he doesn't do good work! Again, I've got nothing against the kid personally, I'm sure he's doing his best, but the mayor-"

"It wasn't his fault! How the hell was he supposed to have predicted an assassination, let alone handle either the shooter or the mayor in time?!" Techno demands, and Wilbur just sighs. This fucking sucks. Tommy chews on his sandwich. It tastes like nothing. "I don't see

you getting off your ass and doing something half as brave as what Spider-Man does!"

"He can't be expected to handle every single fucking problem in London while also being expected to leave things to the police to handle," Tubbo says, equally as heated, and Wilbur actually starts to look a little sheepish. Tommy eats more of his sandwich. "You and anyone else criticising him have *no* idea just how many good things he does, and he doesn't do it for some kind of reward, he just genuinely wants to help people!"

Techno nods. "He's doing more for the community than anyone else, and somehow the cops think he deserves to be crucified for things he can't control," he says, and Wilbur looks away. "If you want to keep criticising him when he messes up, go ahead, we can't stop you. But the kid is doing *good work*, and if the only thing he gets in return for that is a whole bunch of complaints, how the hell do you think that'd make him feel?"

Wilbur stays quiet for a moment, then he looks up at Techno. "I understand what you mean," he says, and that seems to be the end of it. Tommy sits up properly, and Wilbur gives him a concerned look. "Fuck, Toms, I'm sorry. We keep getting into fights in front of you, I-I shouldn't... I'm sorry."

"It's fine," Tommy mutters. He's used to Wilbur and Techno arguing by now. Tubbo slips back into his seat next to Tommy and puts a hand on his arm. Tommy shrugs him off. "I'm alright, Tubs, it's whatever."

"It's not whatever," Techno says, suddenly looking ten times more uncomfortable. "Wilbur's right. We haven't been goin' about this the right way. I... I got defensive and wanted to prove you wrong, Wil. I lashed out, and I'm... I feel like that wasn't the right thing to do. My... faults... aren't your responsibility, they're my own, and I should've been more mature about it."

Wilbur shifts in unease. "I was... also lashing out. I got in my own head about things and I started overthinking, and I took it out on you. That... wasn't right," Wilbur says, and Techno just shrugs. Tommy glances between the two of them skeptically. "Regardless,

we shouldn't have dragged you into the middle of it, Tommy. We're sorry."

"Yeah, we are," Techno says, which is an odd thing to hear coming from him. Tommy's only ever heard Techno admit he was wrong a handful of times.

Tubbo's frowning down at his phone, and Tommy's glad to have something to ask about other than this really uncomfortable topic. "Everything alright, Big T?" he asks, and Tubbo just scowls, putting his phone up on the table and tapping on a video that's popped up on his Twitter feed. By the looks of it, it's one of the politicians campaigning for the emergency election.

"And I will build my main policies," the man in the video says, standing at a podium, "around the fact that Spider-Man cannot continue his childish antics unchecked. I mean, take the tragedy that's just happened. He refused to comply with the police, and according to a survey that my campaign has done, people are starting to lose faith in our hardworking police force because Spider-Man has prevented them from effectively doing their jobs. And trust me, I will be singlehandedly funding a full, thorough investigation into the assassination. I mean-it's just unacceptable for a maniac in a mask to run around calling himself a hero, getting in the way of our men in uniform and claiming all the glory for himself."

Techno's eyes narrow, and The Sense twinges at the back of Tommy's head. There's something off about this guy. "What the hell is *his* deal?" Techno asks, and Tommy glances at Wilbur, who's pretending as though he's not listening.

"You know, as much admiration as he feels entitled to, people have an actual issue with this guy. I mean, he leaves webs everywhere, our infrastructure folks are constantly overwhelmed with cleaning up after him," the politician says, dark eyes flashing menacingly. Okay, maybe Tommy's embellishing a bit, but seriously, The Sense is really unsettled by this guy. *"This just can't continue. My policies will hopefully ensure a relatively friendly relationship between our local government and Spider-Man, but my focus is on the people. A lot of them are unhappy with how their neighborhoods have been endangered by domestic terrorists-and who are these criminals*

always after? It's Spider-Man!"

There's a round of applause after that, and Tommy feels his stomach drop.

Well, fuck.

This can't be good.

This is a stupid idea.

He's currently sitting in an otherwise empty waiting room, and he's still stewing in the embarrassment of having been picked up early during Sam's class. Tommy wishes Kristin had just texted him instead of having him called up by the PA. In any case, this is still absolute bullshit, and Tommy would rather be fighting Slime, Blaze, 404, Boss, *and* Vos all at once than be sitting here right now.

A door opens, and Tommy looks up from his phone. "Tommy?" a man asks, and Tommy thinks he looks rather dorky, but he gives the guy a little wave anyway. He receives an almost blinding smile in return. "Oh, great! You can follow me back here to my office."

Wonderful. Tommy stands and, with a sigh, follows the guy to a decently-sized office. It's nicely decorated-almost homey, but too professional-looking to truly be comfortable. The therapist gestures to a cozy-looking armchair, and Tommy takes a seat, shifting a little. This is really fucking weird. He's not a fan. But he'd promised Kristin in the car on the way that he'd give it a chance, and it's not as though he can get away with sitting through one awkward hour and calling it quits, because Kristin had also said something about finding the 'right' therapist and how it might take a while to do that, so he might as well *try* to cooperate.

"Right, so, uh, I'm Tommy, but you knew that," he says, and the therapist smiles and nods as he sits down on the couch across from Tommy. "Fuck am I supposed to call you, then?"

"Language," the therapist chides lightly, and Tommy scoffs. "And I'm Dr. Halo, but you can just call me Bad. This first session is sort of a

way for you and me to get to know each other. If you don't want to share something with me, you don't have to, and that goes for every session we might have together. There's no pressure."

Tommy nods, his leg starting to bounce with nervous energy. "Cool," he says, and he goes silent, looking around the room again. There's a picture of a dog on the desk in the corner. It's rather ugly, at least in Tommy's opinion.

Bad looks down at Tommy's knee, and Tommy forces his leg to stop bouncing. "You seem a little nervous," Bad notes, and Tommy wants to tell him that no shit he's nervous, he doesn't need therapy and he's being forced to talk to some fucking guy about his nonexistent panic attacks. "I can imagine it's a little jarring to be in your first ever therapy session."

"I'm not nervous," Tommy says, nibbling at his nails. Bad just hums. This guy is weird; he's not saying Tommy's lying about not feeling nervous, but he doesn't seem to believe Tommy either. "I'm *not*."

"Okay, you're not nervous," Bad says easily. He just taps his pen idly on his little clipboard, and Tommy resumes bouncing his leg. It's just an hour, isn't it? He just has to wait out this guy for an hour, and then he can go back home and get to patrol. Bad clears his throat. "So, how was your day?"

Tommy blinks at him, brows furrowed. "You... want to know how my day was?" he asks. Bad nods, and Tommy slumps a little in his seat. This has to be a trap, right? Like, if he answers wrong, he's gonna be told it's because he has some weird anxiety thing, and then Bad's going to try and pry more information out of him. Tommy decides to go with something simple. "It was fine."

"I'm glad your day was fine. What did you do at school?" Bad asks, and Tommy narrows his eyes. This guy isn't subtle; Puffy asks the same kind of 'easy' questions whenever she wants to know something. When Tommy doesn't answer right away, Bad smiles. "Did you talk to your friends? How were your classes?"

"They were fine," Tommy says, because they *were*. He shifts uncomfortably in his chair. This is the *worst*. At least with Puffy,

Tommy knows where it'll lead if he answers honestly. "Everything was fine."

"Not good? Just fine?" Bad asks, and Tommy curses under his breath. There's the fucking catch, of *course* there's a gotcha. Tommy just shrugs. Bad writes something down. Tommy frowns at the scratching of the pen on the clipboard. The fuck is he writing down? Tommy hasn't even *said* anything-nothing of substance, anyway. "What was your morning like? Did you eat breakfast?"

Tommy picks at a stray thread on the armchair. "Yeah. I had bacon and toast," he answers. He'll keep his answers short, and then Bad won't have anything to go off of. "My morning was fine."

"You have brothers, right? What are they like?" Bad asks, and of *course* Kristin had talked to the guy beforehand. Tommy really should've seen this coming. He just shrugs again, eye twitching when Bad writes something else down. "You don't know, or you don't want to talk about it?"

This is annoying.

Tommy doesn't have anything against therapy in theory, really, it's something that helps a lot of people and it's nothing to be ashamed of. He just... doesn't need it. This is stupid, it's pointless, and it's taking up time that someone who actually *does* need therapy could use. Kristin and Phil are just wasting their money. Tommy is *fine*, everything is *fine*, and he doesn't need some guy to tell him there's something wrong with his brain or his coping mechanisms or whatever.

"Of course I know what they're like, I live with them," he snaps, arms crossed, and Bad looks at his leg bouncing again. Tommy forces himself to sit still. Bad writes something else down, and Tommy feels immensely judged. "Okay, what the *fuck* are you writing?!"

"Language," Bad says airily, and Tommy grumbles a few unintelligible swears. This fucking guy. "These are just my session notes. Right now, I'm writing about how you try to suppress your nervous movement whenever I happen to notice it."

Tommy blinks in surprise at the honesty. "I told you, I'm *not* nervous," he says through gritted teeth, and Bad peers up from his notes, locking eyes with Tommy. Tommy looks away. "I just think this whole thing is a waste of everybody's time and money."

Humming, Bad scribbles down the last of his notes and looks up again. "And why do you think it's a waste of time and money?" he asks, and Tommy fucking hates this. It's so annoying. It's not as if Bad actually cares what he thinks, he's just being paid to ask a couple of questions.

"Because I don't have a problem," Tommy answers easily, arms still crossed as he slouches down further in the armchair. Bad tilts his head, and Tommy huffs. "Everybody thinks I've got these panic attacks, but I fuckin' don't, so this is pointless."

Folding his hands on his knee, Bad raises a brow. "Language," he says, and Tommy kind of wants to throttle him. "Why does everyone think you have panic attacks?" This time he sounds genuinely curious, so Tommy looks at him again.

"Apparently getting a little anxious now and again is considered a 'panic attack' by their standards," Tommy says, and Bad chuckles lightly. "I mean, seriously, I get nervous about a grade and Ranboo's all concerned and shit, it's so stupid."

"Language," Bad says again, though it's becoming clear he's getting tired of trying to keep Tommy from swearing. "Who's Ranboo?"

Tommy runs a hand through his hair. "Oh, he's one of my friends, super nice dude, he just worries too much," he says, and Bad nods for him to go on. "We met when he moved here, me and him and Tubbo-that's my best friend, I've basically known him since we were both born, we practically live together half the time, *mi casa es su casa* and all that-we're all super close."

Bad writes something else down, and Tommy freezes up. He'd forgotten they're in a therapy appointment for a second there. "Well, I'm glad you've got some good friends," he says, and Tommy goes back to pointedly staring at his shoes. "Why was Ranboo so concerned about you being nervous about a grade?"

"I dunno, I guess... I guess I was kinda overreacting. Only a little bit, though," Tommy clarifies, and Bad smiles, eyes glinting playfully.

"Only a little," he agrees, "of course."

Tommy stifles a laugh. Sarcastic bastard. "Seriously, it's not that bad, I'm just kinda... I just get a little anxious sometimes, I don't have, like, a *problem*," Tommy says, and Bad tilts his head again. "I don't, not really, I mean-sometimes my hands get shaky, but that's just a normal reaction to being nervous! Sure, I get really nauseous, and yeah, it gets hard to breathe when I'm really overwhelmed, and I start thinking about the worst case scenarios, but that's just normal sh-stuff! Everybody feels like that when they're anxious!"

Bad smiles sadly at him. Tommy groans. Not this fucker as well. "Tommy, what exactly makes you anxious?" he asks, and Tommy blinks at him. Well, he hadn't expected *that*. "When you're anxious, is there usually something that sets it off? Like is there a specific sound, or maybe a sensation you don't like?"

"Uh... I mean, I usually get anxious when there's, like... rumbling? I don't know if that makes any sense," Tommy mutters, and Bad nods encouragingly. "Yeah, like-it's sorta like the same feeling as an earthquake, like if someone's coming up the stairs too loudly, if it shakes the floor, my hands get all shaky and-and I get anxious."

"Is that the main thing? Anything else?" Bad asks, writing something down, and Tommy's trying to think of what else it could be. At least Bad hasn't been telling him he's having panic attacks, because he's not, some things just make him a little nervous.

Tommy hums. "There's, um... if someone sneaks up on me, it makes me kind of paranoid and my heart beats super fast," he says, leaving out the main bit of it; if The Sense notices someone coming, it warns him, and Tommy's brain jumps right to thinking it's gotta be a criminal, regardless of where he happens to be in the moment. "And if-sometimes when there's a really loud *bang*, it'll make me start hyperventilating n' sh-stuff, and I'll go all... weird. Like, I'll feel like I'm out of my body for a second."

Bad nods again, and he keeps writing. "And you said that these

aren't panic attacks," he says, more like a statement than a question, and Tommy nods. They're not. Bad hums. "Well, I'm not going to lie to you, Tommy, they sure *sound* a lot like panic attacks triggered by memories of and sensations similar to traumatic experiences."

"They're *not*," Tommy insists, and Bad crosses his arms. "They're not even that bad! I mean, yeah, sometimes it takes me, like, three hours to fully get over the anxiety, but it's not-! I'm telling you, they're not panic attacks!"

"Would you like to hear what the symptoms of a panic attack are?" Bad asks, and Tommy nods in defiance. He'll point out that his anxiety isn't *nearly* as bad, and then they'll let him stop wasting all this time and money on therapy. "A racing heartbeat. Trembling. Nausea. Shortness of breath. Feelings of dread. A sensation akin to feeling disconnected from your body. Those are only some of them, granted, but that all sounds to me like what you've been describing."

Ah.

So it would seem.

"No, they're not, they can't be, other people have actual panic attacks, those are worse, they have to have, like, *days* to come down from that shit, whatever *I'm* feeling isn't-they're not-I'm telling you, I..." Tommy trails off, swallowing hard. Bad just waits patiently, which Tommy appreciates. Normally, someone would've cut him off and told him he's wrong by now. "They're not panic attacks, I-they *can't* be."

"Well, other people might have a different experience with panic attacks, but that doesn't diminish the fact that what you're feeling is valid and real. You can think of it sort of like... if you're sad that your favorite restaurant closed, and your friend is sad about failing a test, both of you are *sad*, just in different ways, right? So why *can't* they be panic attacks?" Bad asks, and Tommy starts to feel like his throat's gonna close up. Bad smiles gently at him. "You don't have to answer right away, or at all if you don't want to. Take your time, take a few deep breaths."

Tommy does, because he's not exactly in a position to argue about it right now. "They can't be panic attacks," Tommy says firmly, and Bad waits for him to elaborate. "If they're panic attacks, that means... I just-I can't take *another* thing happening to me, *another* thing that's different about me, what do I do if I'm not *me* anymore?!"

Clutching at his jeans, Tommy tenses his shoulders up. Bad leans forward a little in his seat, brows furrowed. "You don't feel like yourself?" he asks, and Tommy tries to stop his hands from shaking by gripping his knees harder.

"I know I'm me, I do, I just... I don't want even *more* to change," he chokes out, and Bad reaches into a mini-fridge to hand him a bottle of water. Tommy takes it gratefully and downs about half of it. As he screws the top back on, he glances up at Bad and smiles shakily. "Sorry, I don't mean to be all... I shouldn't dump all that out."

"Tommy, it's my job to listen to you, you're allowed to talk about whatever you want, and we can work through it," Bad says, a little confused tilt to his head as he smiles at Tommy. "There's nothing to apologize for. This is a safe place to talk about how you feel. Nothing leaves this room unless you want it to, or unless I'm concerned about your safety or the safety of other people."

Tommy hums. "Yeah, mandatory reporting, right?" he asks, and Bad looks slightly surprised as he nods. Tommy shrugs and takes another swig of water. "Tubbo's aunt is a therapist-or, she's about to be one, I guess, she's still doing, like, the hours thing. She's got all the same tricks you use."

"Tricks?" Bad asks curiously, and Tommy just shrugs again. "I'm not trying to trick you into sharing anything you don't want to, Tommy. You don't have to answer any questions you're uncomfortable with, and if there's ever a topic you don't want to talk about just yet, you can let me know, and we'll move on to something different. I'll always do my best to respect any boundaries you put in place."

Tommy blinks. Well, that's odd. He's not used to someone being so... thorough about talking to him and making sure he's comfortable with it. Sure, his family's great, but Techno hardly ever wants to talk about feelings, and Wilbur can be super pushy. Phil's

pretty easy to talk to, but he gives up the conversation as a whole pretty quickly if he senses Tommy doesn't want to talk about one thing in particular. Kristin's pretty good about it, but Tommy never wants to burden her, and that gets in the way a lot. Tubbo's easiest to talk to, but sometimes he's more focused on calling out Tommy's bullshit than actually listening to him. Ranboo is really easily worried, as is Puffy, and Tommy always hates making them anxious.

So this... is nice.

It's a good change of pace.

Maybe therapy's not that bad.

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! I based the latter half of it on my own experiences with therapy, along with a good bit of research I did. Everyone's experiences with therapy can greatly differ, so while this might be really accurate for some people, it might be completely inaccurate to others!

I'm super super excited for these next few chapters (and I know you guys get worried about angst whenever I say that, I promise I'm just proud of my writing, lol)!! I am super super excited to hear y'all's thoughts on this chapter :D

the club (i)

Chapter 28: the club (i)

Wilbur accompanies Sally to Quackity's club. It's Faculty Night.

Woohoo! Wilbur time :)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Wilbur had been utterly shocked when Sally had offered to be his date to Quackity's club.

She had confronted him after one of his classes, and he'd been a total mess as she'd smiled that pretty smile of hers and told him to pick her up at seven on Friday. It had made him so nervous for today that he'd smoked an entire pack and taken three showers to be rid completely of the smell. Now, here he is, driving his beloved car, with her in the passenger seat. Wilbur drums his fingers on the steering wheel anxiously and glances over at Sally; she gives him a soft smile, and his heart fucking *leaps*. He feels like a goddamned kid again when he's with her.

"So... have you been to Quackity's club before?" he asks as he pulls into a parking garage, and she nods, flipping down the mirror to adjust her lipstick. It's a dusty pink color, and it makes her lips look really soft; Wilbur wonders what kind of gloss she's wearing over it, it's shiny but not sticky, and he should probably stop staring at her mouth now.

"Ready to go when you are, Soot," she says, dark eyes twinkling, and Wilbur's stomach flips as he hurries out to get her door for her. Grinning, Sally trails a hand over his shoulder-such a small touch shouldn't make his skin feel this electric, but logic seems to evade him whenever Sally's around. "Such a gentleman, aren't you?"

Wilbur's grin is a bit more nervous than playful, but as Sally gently loops her arm into his, his shoulders lose a bit of their tension. "Well, of course! It's only proper when one is enjoying the company of such a lovely lady," he says, and she giggles, actually *giggles*! As he leads her down the street towards Las Nevadas-a stupid name for a club in Wilbur's opinion, but he's not going to voice that-Wilbur starts to ramble. "This is nice, y'know, the lights are really cool, even if the color scheme is a little typical, I mean-blue and gold? They're such club colors, aren't they? Reminds me of the time Dad was rooting for this football team back when I was, like, eight, and Techno painted Tommy's face with blue and gold, he had to sit in the bath for *hours* to scrub it all off. Not that that has anything to do with tonight, that's, uh-I don't know why I'm bringing this up, let's go into the club, then-"

"Wilbur, relax," Sally says softly, mirth lacing her voice, and Wilbur fucking *melts* at the way his name leaves her lips. She reaches up to brush a curl away from his eyes, and Wilbur feels positively divine. She then taps a finger to his nose and slips from his grasp, handing her cover charge over to the bouncer. Wilbur does the same, the hairs on his arm standing on end as she takes his hand and leads him inside.

"Have I told you that you look lovely, by the way? Because you do, you really look just... so fantastic," Wilbur says, leaning close to her as the music gets too loud for normal conversation. And she does; Sally has on this beautiful, form-fitting pink dress-it's got all these frills, they fall around her hips like she's some kind of mermaid, it's a perfect dress for dancing. Her hair's different as well, now she's got these really gorgeous golden cuffs in her braids that cast glittering spots of light like freckles on her face when the club lights hit them *just* right. "You look *so* lovely, Sally."

Sally bites her bottom lip, her eyes dance across his face, and Wilbur starts to lean towards her, their fingers still intertwined. "Sally!" someone calls out, and the two of them turn to see Niki and

Sam. Niki's still waving, and she seems to notice Wilbur's there too. "Oh! Hey, Wil! Come dance with us, y'know you want to!"

Sally's hand lingers in his for a moment, but she gestures towards the bar, and Wilbur glances back at it. "Um, would you mind... would you grab us some drinks? I'm just gonna go and say hi," she says, and Wilbur nods easily.

"Yeah, 'course, I've got it covered," Wilbur says easily, and she gives him a squeeze before moving through the crowd to get to Niki and Sam. Wilbur takes a few deep breaths—he's really got to get this under control—and he heads over to the bar, handing his card over to the bartender and ordering two martinis. He sees a rather familiar head of pink hair, and he taps his brother on the shoulder. "Tech! What're you doing here, man?!"

Techno lifts his beer bottle in acknowledgement, looking as though he'd rather be anywhere else right now. Wilbur's kind of surprised he's here at all; Techno hates parties and he hates crowds, and he *especially* hates clubs, mostly because they're a mixture of the two. "A friend recommended it," he says, and Wilbur scoffs. "That, and Domino's fired me."

"That makes more sense. You've not got any friends," Wilbur snorts, and Techno rolls his eyes, ordering the two of them some shots. Wilbur glances over to where Sally's still happily chatting and swaying with Sam and Niki. "D'you think she's into me? Like properly, I mean."

"She asked you out, didn't she? Congrats on that, by the way," Techno says, and Wilbur clinks their shotglasses together as they both take a shot. Techno doesn't react, the bastard, but Wilbur winces. This shit straight up tastes like arsenic. Techno smacks Wilbur's chest with the back of his hand. "Fix your shirt collar, it's sticking up."

Wilbur hurries to adjust it. He doesn't want to look like a moron in front of Sally, even though he's semi-certain that ship has already sailed. "I look good, yeah?" he asks, gesturing to his outfit, and Techno raises a brow. Wilbur's pretty sure he looks alright, can't exactly go wrong with a button-down under a nice knit jumper and

some slacks.

Shaking his head fondly, Techno tugs on Wilbur's jumper. "Lose this, you look like you're about to go to your eighth grade formal," he says, and Wilbur whips it off, shoving it towards Techno as he desperately attempts to smooth his hair down. "You could do with undoin' a couple of buttons, too. Don't look so uptight."

"I do *not* look uptight," Wilbur protests, because he *doesn't*. He's not fucking uptight, he's just the proper amount of nervous for this. This technically counts as a date, which means he's got to play this right, or he risks totally fucking up his one chance with Sally.

Techno raises a brow at him.

Okay, so *maybe* he's a little uptight about this.

"She's gonna like you regardless, but it'd help if you *didn't* look like a Sunday school teacher," Techno says, and Wilbur scowls at him. After another sip of beer, Techno stares at him flatly and jerks his head towards Wilbur's shirt. "Seriously, man. Lose some buttons."

He hurriedly undoes a few, then does one back up when Techno gestures for him to. He takes another shot and rolls his shoulders. "Right. Right. I got this, I'm cool, I'm fuckin' amazing, I'm gonna be so smooth, I'm-hey! Sally, you're back!" Wilbur says, a hand behind his neck, and Sally grins at him. Their fingers brush ever-so-slightly as he goes to pass over her martini, and it feels like lightning. "So, did you want to-"

"Hey, miss, fancy a dance?" someone asks from behind them, and Sally turns, signature take-no-shit look on her face. There's a guy there, and Wilbur thinks that the red and blue glasses are a... bold fashion choice, for lack of a better word. "Detective Jack Manifold, at your service, miss. A dance?"

"Oh, I don't think..." Sally trails off, glancing at Wilbur, and he blinks. He doesn't want to stop her from having fun, and it's not as though he would mind her dancing with one of their friends, and it's also not as though she's going to suddenly ditch him for this guy.

He takes her martini. "You can go dance, if you'd like, I-I don't mind," he says, and Sally's brows furrow. Wilbur looks over at the guy-the detective, he supposes-and grins. "Long as she's okay with it, yeah?"

Sally gives him a small smile before taking the detective's hand and following him out to the dance floor. Wilbur turns heel back to the bar and slips into the barstool next to Techno with a sigh. "Nice one, Casanova," Techno snorts, and Wilbur flips him off. Techno leans away and mumbles something, but Wilbur's too embarrassed to pry. "Why didn't you just go dance with her, man?"

"I just need a little liquid courage, that's all," Wilbur says, ordering another shot and downing the rest of both his and Sally's margaritas. Techno gives him a wary look, but Wilbur just ignores him. He'll just have a few before he goes out there, it'll be alright. Wilbur glances out at the dance floor, where Sally's dancing with that Manifold guy. His hands are in her's. "D'you think she likes him more than she likes me?"

Techno smacks him upside the head. "She just met him, dumbass. Don't get jealous, she'll be back any minute now," Techno assures him, and Wilbur makes a face. "No more shots for you, alright? You're being an idiot-yeah."

Frowning, Wilbur shrugs him off. Sally's still dancing with that guy, it's been another song already, shouldn't she be back? Well, in any case, Charlie's just offered to dance with her, and she's said yes, and now Wilbur's pouting over his new cocktail. He looks over the crowd, wondering just how many of his coworkers are here.

There's Sam and Niki, of course, who he's already seen, and they're dancing together by Fundy, who's currently stepping stiffly side-to-side on his own. Wilbur thinks that guy's a prick, mostly because he'd given Tommy a scolding in the staff room that one time. Then there's Fran, dancing with Karl and... someone vaguely familiar that Wilbur can't quite place. And there are other teachers, sure, but Wilbur's not really close with many of them, despite having worked at the school for a good few years.

In any case, Wilbur's still keeping an eye on Sally and Charlie. Not

like he thinks Charlie's *interested* in Sally, per se, but the guy's an enigma. He can hardly tell what Charlie's thinking half the time, and he addresses everyone *so weirdly*. Wilbur sighs again as Sally turns to Niki and says something that makes both her and Sam laugh uproariously.

Sam swaps places with Sally, and Wilbur frowns as Sally's hands find their way to Niki's waist, Niki's arms around her shoulders. They're all friends, really, and of course Sally's more comfortable dancing with Niki than that Manifold guy. Wilbur doesn't care that Sally's forehead is touching Niki's, really, he doesn't. He couldn't care less that they're both grinning with their bodies pressed close together in the crowd.

Wilbur doesn't have any *claim* or anything over Sally, she's her own person, he knows that, he's not going to get possessive for no reason because she's dancing with their friends before she's even had a single dance with him. And she'd even looked to him to make sure it's alright, even though she's not at all obligated to extend him that courtesy! This is just stupid. Wilbur takes another sip of his cocktail.

"You're pouting," Techno says, poking him in the cheek, and Wilbur smacks his hand away. He glares at him, and Techno gives him an easy grin. "You're tryin' to stare a hole in Niki's head, man, chill out a little, and *stop drinking*. You don't get confident when you drink past, like, three shots, you get stupid, sappy, and jealous."

"I do not! Oh, you fuckin' prick, I'll-!" Wilbur cuts himself off as he sees Quackity approaching with a tall blonde woman on his arm, looking rather harried. Wilbur's brow furrows, and he stands from the barstool, arms crossed. "Hello, *Quackity*."

"Wilbur Soot! My good friend! I see your date's with someone else at the moment," Quackity says, and Wilbur glares at him. Quackity nudges the woman beside him forward, and she looks at Wilbur—looks into his fucking *soul*, Jesus-nose and mouth covered by a white mask. With a smile, Quackity ushers her forward towards Wilbur. "*This* is my other good friend, Mamacita. I think you two oughta spend a little time together. You're gonna get along great, I just know it!"

The woman-Mamacita-remains stoic. Wilbur thinks she seems nice enough, but he doesn't *really* want to dance with anyone other than Sally, who has apparently moved on to dancing with someone Wilbur vaguely remembers meeting before. "Uh, actually, I think I'm good staying by the bar," he says, clapping a hand on Techno's shoulder. "Just... chilling with my brother."

Quackity smiles tensely, one hand still on the small of Mamacita's back. "Right," he says, dragging out the 'i' and giving Techno a short nod. "I think I saw you at the fundraiser. Great to meet you properly, man. Anyways, Wil, you really oughta dance! It'll be fun!"

"I'm waiting for Sally, actually," Wilbur says, giving Mamacita a polite smile. She just continues to stare at him stoically. It's rather unnerving.

Tilting his head, Quackity's smile turns a little malicious. "Well, she doesn't really seem to be waiting for *you*, hm?" he says, eyes narrowed, and Wilbur's jaw clenches. Quackity looks up at Mamacita and nods. "Right, well, I think Mamacita's gonna stick around here for a bit, just in case you change your mind. Buy her a drink, be a gentleman, yeah?"

Wilbur gives Quackity a sardonic smile and scowls at his back as he leaves. Mamacita isn't even sitting in a seat, just standing there with her arms crossed. In Wilbur's opinion, she looks more like one of the bouncers than a patron. He wonders where the hell Quackity had managed to meet her.

Not one to be challenged, Wilbur turns to Mamacita and smiles. "Right, might as well, what's your drink?" he asks, and Mamacita turns to the bartender and holds up three fingers. The bartender nods and pours three fingers of whiskey. She takes it, pulls down her mask, and downs it in one easy gulp. Christ, that's intimidating.

Techno's slipping off to some corner, and Sally is *still* dancing-now with *another* guy that's weirdly familiar, and Wilbur pushes his empty cocktail glass away. "We should go and have a dance," Mamacita says, her voice *heavily* accented with something similar to Russian, if Wilbur's correct. She offers a hand to Wilbur, and he's still trying to be polite, but he *doesn't* want to dance. "Have a dance with me."

"I'm good, thanks," Wilbur says, turning back to look at Sally. She looks as though she's having the time of her life, and she probably is—he knows she loves dancing. She's damn good at it, too, and Wilbur feels invigorated just *watching* her. Sally's hips move in ways Wilbur hadn't even known was possible, and her arms are positively mesmerizing. Unfortunately, they're around that detective guy again. Wilbur watches as she whispers something to him that makes him laugh, and he abruptly turns back to Mamacita. "Actually, I think I'll take that dance."

She nods once firmly and takes his hand, and he leads her out to the dance floor. Mamacita presses close to him—a little uncomfortably so, but Wilbur's too busy watching Sally and the detective laughing and dancing together. Mamacita yanks at his hands and settles them on her hips, and Wilbur blinks.

"You are not very good at this," Mamacita tells him, and Wilbur sighs, standing up straight and adjusting his posture so that he can *actually* try. He's not a total dickhead, he's not going to ruin Mamacita's night just because he's bitter that she's not Sally. He gets into step with her, and Mamacita grabs him by the waist and pulls him close. "If you are trying to make her jealous in a weak attempt at peacocking, you are doing poorly."

Wilbur blinks, eyes wide. "How did you...?" he trails off, but Mamacita doesn't answer. Instead, she keeps dancing with him, and Wilbur struggles to keep up. The rhythm is a little difficult to get into, but he's starting to get the hang of things.

He keeps looking over at Sally, but she isn't even looking at him. Not that he blames her, of course, she's having fun and there's nothing wrong with that. "You move us closer. Show her you are having a good time without her," Mamacita says, and Wilbur's starting to find her nickname a little ill-fitting the more her Russian accent is on display.

But he has to admit, she's kind of got a point, so he moves the two of them a fair bit closer to where Sally has changed dance partners to Fran. "You're a really good dancer!" Wilbur says, loud enough to be heard above the blasting music, and Mamacita's eyes narrow slightly. He can't tell whether it's a good thing or a bad thing, but it

does make Sally glance at them.

Then, Wilbur spots a blur of pink out of the corner of his eye, and he looks over to see Techno being ushered onto the dancefloor by Quackity. His brother stumbles his way *right* into Sally's arms, and she promptly lights up, taking hold of his hands and pulling him into a dance. Wilbur's eyes narrow. Techno hates dancing.

It's very obvious that Techno's uncomfortable as Sally leads, and Wilbur scowls at him. As if Techno can sense that Wilbur's looking at him, his shoulders go up by his ears. Sally dips him, tilting her head back as she laughs, and Wilbur looks down at Techno's upside-down face, glaring. Techno gives him an apologetic smile and is promptly yanked back up by Sally, who gives his arm a reassuring squeeze. Techno deals with a few more minutes of dancing before he's shying away, apologizing to Sally and disappearing into the crowd again.

Sally just shrugs and turns back to Niki. "Are you enjoying dancing with me?" Mamacita asks, and Wilbur nods, grinning nervously as Sally looks towards them again, and he wraps his arms around Mamacita's shoulders. She looks vaguely surprised, but she rolls with it, at least until her phone buzzes; they're so close together that Wilbur can feel it himself. She abruptly drops her hold on him and turns to leave. "I must go. Goodbye."

And thus, Wilbur is stranded in the middle of the dance floor, alone.

Charlie and Fundy seem to have disappeared from the floor as well, and Wilbur slinks back over to the bar in hopes of downing a few more shots. To his surprise, he's stopped by a hand on his shoulder. "Wilbur? Is that you?" someone asks, and Wilbur's slightly surprised to find himself face-to-face with one of the guys that Sally had been dancing with.

"Sorry, do I... do I know you?" Wilbur asks, and the guy nods, looking at him like he's lost his goddamn mind, which Wilbur finds a little rude, actually. He's perfectly sane, thank you very much. "You look familiar, I'm sorry, I'm a little-just a wee bit tipsy, y'know?"

The guy chuckles. "Yeah, man, I know, it's really easy to tell. I'm

Sapnap. Your dad works for me, remember?" he says, and Wilbur's eyes widen in recognition as he nods. Sapnap claps him on the back and leads him towards the dancefloor again. "Yeah, there he is, buddy! Hey, c'mon, I wanna get back to hangin' with Karl, come join us!"

Well, Wilbur doesn't exactly have any other plans, so he shrugs and walks over with Sapnap to where Karl and Sam are. "Oh, Wilbur's here!" Sam cheers, louder than normal, and Wilbur laughs, leaning on his shoulder. "You should've seen us, man! Sally showed me and Niki how to dance! Where were you?"

"Mostly over at the bar, but Big Q introduced me to his friend, she's *really* weird, we danced for a while," Wilbur says, and Sapnap moves over to stand next to Karl, throwing an arm around his shoulders. Wilbur pokes Karl in the chest. "Get this, *Techno* was at the bar."

Sapnap's brows furrow. "Your brother was here? Why the hell was he here?" he asks, and Wilbur thinks that that's a rather interrogative tone for such a casual conversation. And he doesn't know why Techno had been here, so he shrugs.

"Anyways, where's Sally?" Wilbur asks, and Sam gestures to the dance floor, where Sally, Niki, and that detective from earlier are all dancing together. "Christ, that woman can *dance*. Not with me, apparently, but I guess *that* doesn't matter."

Snorting, Sapnap shoves at his shoulder. "Damn, dude, why've you got a stick up your ass?" he jokes, and Wilbur makes a face at him. Sapnap leans closer to Karl, who is *very* focused on his drink. "Tonight is about *fun*, man! Everyone's just having a good time."

"*You* certainly seem to be having fun," Sam says, winking at Karl, who swats at his arm and rolls his eyes. Sam downs a shot from a tray that's just passed them, and he gives them all a brief wave. "Okay, well, *I'm* going to go have fun and dance. Bye!"

They all chorus some farewells, and Wilbur nods his head to the beat of the music. "So, you came here with Sally?" Karl asks, and Wilbur nods again, scowling. Karl's easy grin falters slightly, but he's

still smiling nonetheless. “Why aren’t you dancing with her? Go on! Go!”

Karl breaks away from Sappho’s hold and practically ushers Wilbur towards the dance floor, and Wilbur groans. He bumps into a few people, apologizing along the way, until he finally finds himself in front of Sally, who blinks at him, pleasantly surprised.

God, she’s so ethereal.

Her hair, her nails, her makeup, all elaborately done up. Everything about her is just incredible. Wilbur finds himself entranced in her eyes, reflective of the multicolored lights being cycled through, and he gently reaches out to take her hand. “May I... have this dance, my fair lady?” he asks, and Sally looks amused. Well, *now* he’s a little embarrassed. “Look, I’m drunk out my arse, Sally, you’re gonna have to work with me here.”

Sally’s face falls a little at that. “You’re proper wasted, aren’t you?” she asks, and Wilbur wonders why she sounds so crestfallen. She steps back, and her hand falls from Wilbur’s grasp. He misses the contact dreadfully, and he goes back to reach for her again, only to fall short as Sally steps back once more. “Wil, I thought you agreed to be my date because you wanted to spend time with me, not because you wanted an excuse to drink yourself through yet another fucking party.”

At that, Wilbur’s brain short-circuits slightly. “Wh-Sally, what are you on about? Of *course* I want to spend time with you,” he says, and she sighs, waving off Niki’s concern when she comes over to make sure everything’s alright. Wilbur gives her an uneasy smile. “Please, just give me one dance, I promise I’m here for *you*, okay?”

She hesitates, but Sally’s hand finds its way into Wilbur’s again, and he lights up at the positively electric touch. The song is fairly upbeat, and Sally seems reluctant to even be dancing with him, which just won’t do at all. Wilbur tries to loosen himself up a bit, because he’s admittedly really nervous, and he gives up on trying to look cool entirely.

He can see Sally trying to fight off a smile, so he just keeps dancing

as badly as he possibly can, and she's full on laughing pretty soon. Wilbur's arms are practically noodles, and he bites his bottom lip in concentration as he shifts his shoulders up and down alternatively, stepping side to side in what's very likely not the actual rhythm of the song.

"You look ridiculous," Sally says, and Wilbur *swears* her smile is more radiant than any of the shitty lights in this godforsaken club. As Wilbur continues his antics, if only to draw more laughs from her, Sally grabs his wrists and pulls him close, trapping his arms between the two of them. "Let me show you how to *properly* dance."

She takes his hands gently-so fucking gently, Wilbur might die-and guides him to where his back is pressed against her front, and Wilbur makes a silent prayer that his legs will not, in fact, turn to jelly, as they tend to do when he's around her. Sally puts her hands on his hips and sways her own slowly, though still in line with the beat, and Wilbur can feel his heart pounding in his chest as she puts the slightest of pressure on his hips to guide him to follow her own.

Sally is his favorite melody, Wilbur thinks. Her hands are like a crescendo, building up the energy in his body until he finally feels *loud*, until he feels like he could do anything. That sparkle ever-present in her eyes makes him feel as soft as the whisper of a flute. She's bright and upbeat, a perfect counter to his bittersweet melancholy. Wilbur wants to be her perfect harmony, wants to be the one to compliment her very being. Being with her gives him the same feeling as strumming a guitar once you've finally got it in tune, or when the resonance of a piano hits *just* right .

And she's absolutely delightful. Sally's always the life of the party; even in a shitty staffroom, she can make the entire place light up with her smile. She's incredibly intelligent and fucking *witty*, she can make Wilbur struggle to keep up and make him laugh in the same breath. The stories she tells are captivating, and her way of speaking is so genuinely enjoyable that Wilbur thinks he could listen to her forever and never tire of it. Everything about her is goddamn diaphanous, and Wilbur is Orpheus chasing after Eurydice.

God, he is so fucking screwed.

"Like this?" he asks, praying he's not as red in the face as he feels, and he tries his hardest to copy her movements, though that's incredibly difficult with what little drunken coordination he has left. Sally giggles.

"No, it's more like... this," she murmurs, and Wilbur's going to die a happy man. Sally's heels make her *just* taller than him, and Wilbur tilts his head back slightly so that his curls brush against her neck. He can feel her breath hitch slightly behind him, and it sends his tipsy brain through a loop to realize that he might have the same effect on her as she does on him. "You've almost got it, love, just keep with the rhythm."

At that, Wilbur huffs out a laugh, flipping off Niki as she raises her brows at the two of them, but he quickly puts his hands back over Sally's. "I've got no rhythm, not when it comes to dancing, might have to guide me a little more," he says, tilting his head back far enough that his breath ghosts over Sally's jawline.

She pulls away abruptly, hands still on his hips but a sudden distance between them. "You smell like booze," she says, almost too quiet for him to hear, and Wilbur turns around in her hold, brows furrowed. "Wil... I don't care if you drink, but I *do* care if you have to be completely wasted in order for us to have a goddamn conversation, let alone a good time."

"Wh-Sally, of course I don't have to-I'm just... I get nervous around you," Wilbur says, and Sally sighs. Wilbur takes her hands properly, stepping closer. "I'm sorry, I just... I got nervous and I wanted to be more-I dunno, I wanted to feel more confident! You're so strong and smart, and so, so pretty, I feel like... I feel like if I'm too boring o-or too quiet, you're not gonna like me."

"Wilbur, I like you," Sally says, reaching up to cup his cheek in her hand. Holy shit, that's the best fucking feeling in the entire world. He leans into the touch, and she smiles gently, then it shifts to something sad. "I *really* like you. You're a good guy, you just... you have to get your head out of your ass, mate."

Completely taken aback, Wilbur scoffs. "Pardon?" he asks, and Sally gives him a flat look. He doesn't know whether to find it irritating or

hot that she's looking down at him. "I-I'm sorry, I don't quite... I don't know what you mean."

Sally looks away. "Nevermind," she mumbles, and Wilbur's got half a mind to tell her to explain herself, but another song comes on, and she lights up. "Oh, this is my favorite! Come dance with me, we'll talk about this another time!"

While Wilbur *is* rather tempted to pursue the topic, this song is, in fact, an absolute fucking banger.

So he follows Sally out into the middle of the floor and follows her lead, happily letting Niki, Sam, Karl, and Sapnap form a bit of a circle with them. Wilbur's chest feels as though it's glowing, and he takes Niki by the hand, twirling her around. Sapnap cheers, and Karl pulls Sam into a mock-waltz.

Everything is absolutely incredible, and while Wilbur can't stand the guy, he's got to hand it to Quackity. He'd put together this night, after all, and it's been ridiculously good, other than the momentary spat with Sally. Wilbur's honestly quite surprised the club is as nice as it is; when Quackity had invited the lot of them, Wilbur had assumed that Las Nevadas wouldn't be as big a deal of it is. Then again, he hardly knows anything about the London club scene.

As he watches Sally pull Sapnap into an awkward imitation of a Charleston, Wilbur laughs and leans half on Sam, who's trying to bring Niki into his and Karl's weird dance that Wilbur is ninety-nine percent sure he's seen on Tik Tok before. This is absolutely amazing, it's so much fucking fun, way more fun than their usual bowling nights and board game fiascos. Wilbur wonders why they haven't done this sooner.

And then everything cuts out, and they're all shrouded in darkness. Several people start screaming, Wilbur included.

Oh boy, I wonder why there was a sudden blackout! Surely the tip

that Tubbo had wanted to investigate is not at all related! Surely Tommy is at home, safe and sound! Nothing could possibly go wrong :D

As always, thank you guys for all your feedback, it really means a lot to me knowing that people out there like what I write :)

the club (ii)

Chapter 29: the club (ii)

Tommy, Tubbo, and Techno investigate Las Nevadas.

It's really funny how this chapter came about lmao. I finished writing chapter 28, watched In The Heights almost *directly* after, and decided to just run with the similarities. This chapter had a completely different outline before I watched the movie, but I *definitely* like this version better. Hope y'all enjoy!!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Tommy still doesn't know how Tubbo had gotten Techno to agree to this harebrained scheme of cataclysmically stupid proportions. He's fairly certain it has something to do with blackmail, but he can't be bothered to ask. Tubbo had sat the both of them down to debrief, saying something about a weapons deal going down in the basement of Big Q's club, and that they couldn't let these fuckers ruin Quackity's business, which Tommy completely agrees with.

So, here he is, crawling through a dusty ass vent and listening to Techno mumble his complaints about having to sit at a crowded bar. *"You're our eyes on the ground, quit whining!"* Tubbo tells him firmly, and Tommy rolls his eyes, making a face when the vent gets a little narrower and he has to pinch his shoulders together to shimmy through it. *"Right, Techno, have you seen anything unusual yet? Any shady fucks roamin' around?"*

"Obviously not," Techno snorts quietly, and Tommy narrows his eyes and strains to listen to the room below him. There's some noise, but it's definitely not the place they're looking for, so he keeps moving. *"This earpiece is so uncomfortable-shoot, Wil's here. I'm gonna have to talk to him, mute me."*

"On it!" Tubbo chirps, and Techno's end of things goes silent. The comms are a lot less loud now, thankfully. Tommy keeps moving forward, stopping to check each vent as he goes along, just in case they'd moved the deal location at the last second. *"So, I'm seeing a few people down in the basement on the cameras, but I don't think it's any of our guys."*

Tommy hums and takes a right, squinting down into the room below him. Damn, another supply closet. "God, is there a fucking night vision setting or something?" Tommy mutters, and Tubbo scoffs at him.

"Of course there's a night vision setting, but it's for emergencies only. It takes up a whole lot of battery power, and I can only afford so much," Tubbo tells him, and Tommy huffs. Fair enough, he supposes. These vents are still annoying, though. *"Techno, everything good up on the surface?"*

"-being an idiot-yeah," Techno says, and his end goes silent again. Tommy keeps looking down into basement rooms, and Tubbo keeps clicking rhythmically, presumably looking at different security cameras. Tommy's still vaguely impressed that he had managed to hack into the system. After a couple more minutes, Techno unmutes himself-Tommy stifles a laugh at the mental image of his brother tapping twice on his earpiece like he's in a spy movie. *"Alright, Quackity's actin' weird. He brought some lady over to Wilbur and tried really hard to convince them to dance, I think he doesn't want anybody by the bar."*

Tubbo makes a vaguely confused sound, and Tommy nods in agreement. That doesn't really make any sense. *"Why wouldn't he want to make money? You're not making any sense here, Blade,"* Tubbo says, and Techno sighs in frustration. Tommy would chime in with a similar argument to back him up, but he's got to keep quiet.

"I don't know, I'm just tellin' you what I'm seeing," Techno says through gritted teeth, and Tommy peers into the room below him, vaguely surprised to see a ton of storage that *definitely* doesn't look like a place you'd store drinks or food in. *"Dammit, Quackity's comin' my way, mute me again."*

Tubbo does not, in fact, mute Techno. *"Now you've got me doubting Big Q, so we're gonna listen in,"* he grumbles, and Techno makes a short noise of protest, but he quickly quiets himself as there are footsteps approaching him.

Tommy tries his hardest not to laugh as Techno greets Quackity with a hello so strained it sounds like he's gonna explode. *"Ay, Techno, right? You oughta dance! At least try to have a good time, man,"* Quackity says, and Tommy finds it really odd to hear a conversation happening over the comms. He's only ever talked to Tubbo, and the most he's heard is Tubbo yelling in response to Puffy calling for him.

"Oh, uh, I don't-yeah, I don't dance, man," Techno says, and Tommy snickers. He carefully starts to take the vent out from under him, carefully wrenching it from its place with his superstrength; he doesn't exactly have a screwdriver on him, he just hopes Quackity doesn't mind replacing a grate.

"C'mon, everybody's dancing! You oughta go keep your brother company," Quackity says, with a little more urgency this time, and The Sense goes off a little as Tommy drops quietly into the storage room. Techno starts to stutter, and there are footsteps, and Tommy's eyes go wide. Is Quackity fucking frog-marching Techno to the dance floor or some shit?! *"There you go, have a dance! I'm sure Sally won't mind."*

"Help me," Techno hisses under his breath, and Tubbo bursts out laughing. Tommy tries his damn hardest not to laugh, lest he alert anyone potentially guarding the door. *"Hey, Sally. I'm, uh... I'm Wilbur's brother. Techno."*

Thankfully, Tubbo has the mercy to mute Techno, and Tommy is not forced to sit through his brother's stilted attempts at small talk while dancing. *"Right, I can see you on the cameras, but I'm wiping over*

the footage as we speak so don't worry. What's in those boxes?" Tubbo asks, and Tommy pries one of the tops off, eyes widening at the sheer amount of firearms in it. *"Oh, shit."*

"What the fuck, what the fuck, what the *fuck?!"* Tommy whispers frantically, putting the lid back on the box and scrambling back into the vent as The Sense starts to push at the back of his mind, and there are footsteps approaching not even thirty seconds after he's hidden himself back in the vents. "What the fuck, why the *fuck* are there so many guns?!"

"I don't fucking know, I didn't think there'd be that many!" Tubbo tells him, equally as frazzled, and his typing starts up. Techno is still muted, and Tommy watches with wide eyes as a few figures make their way into the rooms.

It's a tall, muscular woman he's never seen before, accompanied by Vos and someone else that Tommy hasn't seen before. The woman has a mask, as does the person Tommy's not seen before, and, of course, Vos has his stupid fox mask on. "Top two boxes. We will take them down to the power room, Boss will meet us there," the woman says, voice thick with a Russian accent, and Tommy watches as Vos picks up the box on the left, the other guy heading for the box on the right. "Good. Follow me."

She leads them out, and Tommy can hear Tubbo's rhythmic clicking start up again. *"The power room should be three to your left and straight down, the vent is directly above the generator,"* he says, and Tommy heads straight there as fast as he can. *"It'll take them much longer to get down there, you've got time to take Boss out."*

Tommy nods firmly and creeps out of the vent above the generator, sticking to the ceiling and glancing out over the array of panels and fuse boxes. This place is fucking eerie. Why the hell does he always fight Boss in scary-ass places?! In any case, Boss is right fucking below him, which is objectively terrifying.

He's gotten an upgrade from the-presumably stolen-volunteer outfit and mask from the carnival. He's dressed like a goddamned mob boss straight out of a cheesy American movie, and his mask has LED's where his mouth should be. Tommy wonders if he can

actually talk out of that thing, and if the expression on it, a creepy ass pixelated smile, matches Boss's face.

"Hurry the fuck up," Boss mutters, tapping his foot impatiently, and Tommy goes pale at the sight of some powerful-looking boots. They've got to at *least* be steel-toed, and that shit's gonna hurt. "C'mon, c'mon... I haven't got all damn day, just get the shit from the bar down here."

Oh, so they're taking things from the bar as well? That gives Tommy *loads* more time. "*What are you waiting for?*" Tubbo asks, and Tommy closes his eyes in frustration as Boss straightens up at the slight noise.

Tommy flips himself down, firing a web off at Boss's mask and tugging, but it doesn't move. Boss grabs the web with his gauntlet and rips it off of his face. So Tommy's webs don't stick on Boss's gauntlet. Good to know. "I should've known you'd come to ruin the fun," Boss says, and the LED mask flashes to a menacing-looking grin, at least by pixelated standards. "Let's dance, Spidey."

"Gotta say, not really a fan of supervillains giving me nicknames," Tommy says, dodging Boss's first punch and using two webs to propel himself forward and kick Boss into one of the fuse panels. Yikes. At least that doesn't seem to have done any terrible damage.

Boss recovers quickly and reaches out to grab him; Tommy just barely dodges, and he throws a jab of his own, connecting with Boss's jaw. He shudders- *'his jaw just fucking unhinged'* -and stumbles back as Boss sends a shock of indigo lightning his way. Thankfully, he and Tubbo had planned for this, and Tommy only feels a minimal amount of static due to the rubber lining between the layers of his suit.

That same manic pixel grin on his mask, Boss sends an even bigger shock towards him, but The Sense warns Tommy in time, and he dives out of the way. The electricity hits another fuse panel, and the lights flicker briefly. "I'd really love it if you'd stay out of my way," Boss growls, and Tommy dodges another couple of punches. Fighting Boss tends to keep him on the defensive; it isn't really an option to throw punches when he's constantly dodging lightning.

"You and I want the same thing, Spider-Man! I'm *helping* the community!"

"Huh? *Really*, now! All the guns and stolen goods sure do give off the wrong impression!" Tommy says as he jumps back, narrowly avoiding an electrically-charged punch, and Boss laughs. God, this guy is fucking weird.

They exchange a good few blows, and Tommy feels vaguely dazed from all the electricity. He's quickly being pushed towards the wall with the generator again, and as he skids to a stop right in front of it, Boss rolls his shoulders. "C'mon, kid, give it up. You can't win against lightning," Boss says, and the grin gets somehow more menacing.

"Oh, really? Because it seems like your shocks aren't really doing much," Tommy lies through his teeth, and the LED grin twitches. There it is. Tommy can provoke him-Boss is almost as temperamental as Blaze, and that's saying something-and hopefully let him knock himself out with the force of his electricity paired with the generator. "Yeah, that's right, your shocks are fuckin' *weaksauce*, man! Turn it up a few notches, give me a *real* challenge!"

Boss laughs mirthlessly and the gauntlet fucking *whirs*, a whirlwind of indigo lightning swirling around Boss's arm. He charges forward, and Tommy faux-braces himself as the hairs on his body stand on end with the force of the static in the air, dodging out of the way *just* as he can see the individual pixels of Boss's mask.

The gauntlet connects with the generator, and everything goes pitch fucking black.

Thank *fuck* for Tubbo's emergency night vision feature.

"What the fuck happened?! What the hell is happening?!" Boss shouts, and something crackles, then there's quiet mumbling. Telltale sign of comms. Tommy backs away from Boss slowly as the villain attempts to wrench his arm out of the wreckage. "A blackout?! What the fuck do you *mean* a blackout?!"

Tommy takes that as his cue to leave. He dashes up the stairs and finds himself immediately jostled in a crowd. Presumably, *this* is the dance floor. Tommy leaps onto the ceiling; he highly suspects he's the only one that can see as of right now, and the crowd is pushing against each other in a terrified attempt to get to the doors. It's pretty intense; Tommy should probably try to pry the doors open before a stampede starts. He doesn't want anybody to get trampled.

"Help me get these doors open!" he hears Techno shout from the front, and sure enough, his brother is trying to pry them open himself. God, this must be hell for Techno, being pushed up against a bunch of strangers in a crowded club.

"Yeah, somebody open the fuckin' doors already, screw the security protocol!" someone else shouts, and Tommy quickly makes his way to the front, hanging down from the ceiling and bracing himself. He shoulders the door open, and the crowd starts to pour out onto the street, panicked yells for dates and friends, shrieks of terror because-oh *shit*, the power's out.

The power is out *everywhere*.

Tommy swings past, huffing in annoyance as Boss, Vos, that other guy, and the woman from earlier pile into a car and start driving off. "Hive, are you still on?" he asks, glancing down at the crowd for Techno, who's currently walking towards where he'd presumably parked his car.

There's no answer. Shit, had the power been taken out *that* far away? Tommy frowns. "Sapnap? Are you there?" Karl calls out, and Tommy blinks in surprise.

"Sally!" Wilbur shouts from down the street, and Tommy glances at the crowd, only to see Sally calling Wilbur's name from the opposite direction. "Sally, I can't find you!"

Niki glances around worriedly near the entrance. "Sam? Jack? Where the hell did you go?!" she asks, raising her voice.

Sally's still calling out for Wilbur. "Wil, are you safe?!" she cries out. "Where are you?!"

"Karl, are you there?!" someone-Sapnap, to be precise-yells, and Tommy sighs. He'll have to trust that the crowd sorts themselves out, he has a bad guy to chase.

He swings in the direction of Tubbo's street, because he wants to see if they can get the generator working, but his night vision is quickly flickering in and out of focus. Shit, the battery must *really* be drained by it. He can see better than most people in the dark, but it's as if the entirety of London has gone completely dark. Tommy swings to an alley nearby, and there's a *click* from his comms.

"Tommy! I've got my phone charged, thank fuck, is your night vision still activated?" Tubbo asks, and Tommy groans. There's the sound of a front door opening, and Tubbo makes a startled kind of sound. *"Ranboo! Are you alright?"*

"Yeah, are you?" Ranboo asks, and Tommy really doesn't have time for this. He gets closer to Tubbo's house; it's embarrassing to be going on foot, but he doesn't exactly have a choice at the moment. *"Oh, shoot, are you on with-you're on call with him?"*

"I am, I'm gonna see if I can send up some flares and fireworks so he can see properly," Tubbo says, and Tommy curses under his breath. Until the emergency lights come on, that *is* technically their best option, but that doesn't stop Ranboo from frantically questioning Tubbo on where he's acquired military-grade flares. *"They're from Puffy's navy days, don't worry about it, let's go-oh, fuck, what the hell are you doing here?!"*

Tommy peeks around the edge of a house, and Tubbo's standing in the middle of the street with a nondescript box, Ranboo at his side and Purpled in front of them. *"Let me help,"* Purpled says flatly, and Tubbo visibly struggles with himself for a moment before putting the box down and handing Ranboo and Purpled a bundle of flares and fireworks each.

Tubbo glances over to where Tommy is, giving him a discreet thumbs-up before setting off the first couple, pushing Ranboo and Purpled back. The fireworks and flares explode in the sky, and Tommy can fucking see, and he dashes off as Tubbo sends a flare bundle in the direction of the club, lighting up the area.

Tommy takes off and looks for the car Boss had taken off in, spotting it as it weaves through other cars on the street. "Well, *somebody's* in a fuckin' hurry," he grumbles, and Tubbo laughs, startling him. He'd forgotten Tubbo can hear him now. "Hive, any chance you can track him down?"

"Not without my PC, and our emergency generator is ridiculously hard to turn on, it's gonna take me a while if I don't have someone strong to get it working," Tubbo says, and Tommy swears under his breath, following the car down another street. *"Oh, fuck, hang on guys, I'm gonna take this back to mine, keep setting off the bundles!"*

There's the sound of footsteps, and then the sound of another person patching in. *"What the hell just happened?!"* Techno demands, and Tommy barks out a laugh. Tubbo's still going up the stairs, evidently, and Tommy just keeps following the car under the light of the flares and fireworks, though they're growing distant by the minute.

He really hopes the emergency lights get turned on soon.

"Techno, can you make it to mine? I need our generator to help Tommy track down Boss and the others," Tubbo says, and there's the screeching of wheels from Techno's end. Tommy supposes that's a yes. *"Okay, Tommy, where are they right now?"*

"They're turning down fourth, I can barely fuckin' see them, though," he says, and Tubbo groans as Techno's engine fucking *roars*. "How far are you from Tubbo's, Tech?"

Huffing, Techno turns, and the wheels screech again. *"A minute, tops,"* he says, and both Tubbo and Tommy let out a sigh of relief at that. There's an abrupt squeak again, then a click. Techno's parked. *"Your generator's in the garage, yeah?"*

Tommy perches atop a building as the car comes to a stop in front of one of the abandoned buildings. Boss gets out, and then the car speeds the hell off again. *"Yeah, it is,"* Tubbo answers, and there's the telltale groaning of metal as Techno forces the garage door open, and then a sound akin to revving up a lawnmower. *"Fuck*

yeah! It's working! Tommy, I'm gonna try to tune into their comms!"

"Sounds good to me," Tommy says, swinging over to the building Boss is currently in, and there's a few scrambled-static noises mixed with a panicked call from a girl to, presumably, her mother, someone yelling in Spanish, and then Russian. "That's the one! The big lady, she was Russian! That's gotta be it!"

"Right, I'm on the translation," Tubbo says, and Tommy hears his bedroom door bang open through the receiver. "Oh, hey, come sit, see if you can get-aha! They turned the emergency lights on, that means security cameras throughout the city are working, cycle through those, Techno."

There's a light laugh-Techno is evidently sitting with Tubbo. *"On it. Lemme see if I can find those idiots,"* he mumbles, and Tommy squints at the door, only slightly surprised when Shroud starts to whirl and form beside him. *"You... gave a drone headlights?"*

Sure enough, Shroud's little red eyes are glowing, enough to light up the door as Boss bursts through, and Tommy barely has time to jump back to the edge of the roof as he throws an electric punch. Shroud starts to fire-thanks, Tubbo-and Boss jumps back, blocking the rubber bullets with his gauntlet.

Tommy takes the initiative to charge at Boss while he's preoccupied, and he grabs Boss by the shoulders, shoving the both of them *hard*, right through the door to the roof. Boss grabs right back and shoves the two of them through the drywall, and they start to fall, exchanging blows as they start to hurtle towards the ground.

Boss grabs him by the wrist and fucking *throws* Tommy into the air, and he pushes off another abandoned building. Ah, so *that's* the point of the boots. He propels forward, and he and Tommy are grappling in midair again, lit up by the fireworks and flares continuing to go off on the horizon. Tommy gets a good hit in on Boss's face, and Boss elbows his stomach, sending him flying backwards.

Tommy's back slams into the side of another building, and he just barely catches himself, stuck to the side of the wall. Boss digs his boots into the brick of an adjacent one, and he's launching himself

towards Tommy almost before he can react. Tommy swings out of the way, then propels forward with the two-web trick, his foot connecting with Boss's chest and sending him through the already-shattered window of one of the buildings.

Steadying himself on the roof of the neighboring building, Tommy shakes out his limbs. God, Boss really isn't holding back on the electricity front. *"Tommy, are you alright?!"* Tubbo asks, and Tommy nods. *"Okay, I'm still running that Russian through translators, but I think they're talking about taking the weapons to a secondary location!"*

There's the noise of a helicopter, and Tommy groans as Boss appears in the window again. He doesn't mind doing interviews, but if the news could fuck off for a little, especially considering they're probably running off emergency electricity, that'd be great. "Oi, Boss!" Tommy calls, hands cupped around his mouth, and Boss brushes some debris from his shoulder. "You gonna come fight me or what?!"

"Just you wait, Spider-Man!" Boss shouts, and his boots press into the brick with the force of the jump, and Tommy meets him in the sky, blocking the punches as fast as Boss throws them. If he can subdue Boss, he can go get those weapons. Boss snarls and grabs his face with the hand not equipped with the gauntlet, and Tommy knees him in the stomach as they topple into another building, breaking through the brick.

"If you could just give up, that would make my job *so much easier*," Tommy huffs, getting into a defensive stance, and Boss laughs. He dashes forward, and Tommy grabs his fist with one hand, swinging his leg out at the back of Boss's knees. Boss jumps back, and Tommy glares at him, chest heaving. "Fun fact! There are ways to help your community out *without* an illegal firearms ring, man!"

Boss chuckles sardonically, then dashes forward, grabbing Tommy around the middle and tackling the two of them through yet another fucking wall. Tommy grapples with him for a moment before freeing himself of Boss's grasp, and he swings up onto the roof of the building they'd just been in.

He's got company not even a moment later, Boss stalking towards him on the rooftop. "If there *were* another way, I'd take it, my friend," he says, and his arm jerks as the gauntlet powers on, an enormous ripple of violet lightning emitting from it. The force of it makes Tommy throw his arms in front of him to block his face on instinct. "Last chance to mind your business, kid! I'd hate to see you on tomorrow morning's news in a body bag!"

"If you come home in a body bag, I'll kill you," Techno says, and Tommy snorts. This, however, enrages Boss, and he starts walking towards Tommy, the static in the air pulsing with each step he takes. *"No matter what happens, if you get knocked down, you get the hell back up again, you hear me? This guy's nothin' without his gadgets."*

Tommy squares his shoulders as Boss's pace picks up, and as Boss reaches out to grab him, Tommy dives backwards off of the roof, grinning when Boss dives right down after him. "Fancy seeing you here! Take swan dives off of abandoned buildings often?" Tommy asks, and he *thwips* out a web towards the two adjacent buildings, waiting until they get tense-right as the hood of his sweatshirt grazes the ground-to slingshot himself towards Boss and send a kick right to his chest. That strategy really never fails.

Boss starts to be thrown back by the force of it, but he grabs Tommy's ankle at the last second and throws him into yet *another* building. Tommy's getting real sick and tired of being tossed around like a baseball. Tommy stands, sways, and dusts himself off. Boss dashes towards him, and Tommy jumps out and away to another building.

How the hell is he meant to outmaneuver Boss?! The guy's absolutely insane! "Don't say I didn't warn you!" Boss shouts, and Tommy squares his shoulders. He's *really* not sure if the rubber layer will be enough to counteract the sheer voltage of the still-building lightning, and he doesn't exactly want to find out.

Again, Boss makes the first move, and Tommy dodges and weaves between punches, trying his hardest to ignore the way the flashing lights from the fireworks getting closer start to irritate his vision. Tommy tries to sweep Boss's legs out from under him, but he misses, and Boss kicks him straight through another wall.

Christ, those boots pack a fucking punch. “*C’mon, Tommy, c’mon...*” Techno mutters, and Tommy’s pretty sure he hadn’t been meant to hear that, but it fuels him anyway.

He swings onto another roof and waits for Boss to follow, which, of course, the bastard does, thinking he’s going to win this. Tommy takes a few deep breaths before charging forward and leaping into the air, Boss doing the same.

As Boss throws his electrified gauntlet forward in a punch, Tommy catches it with both hands and *holds* it there. “*What the hell are you doing?!*” Tubbo shouts, and Tommy grimaces as the lightning surrounds his body, sending shockwaves up both his arms.

But he refuses to let go. If he manages to get Boss to expel enough power, the gauntlet might misfire on him and give Tommy the advantage. So Tommy keeps both hands firmly stuck to the gauntlet as Boss tries to get him off, the two of them tumbling through the air. The indigo light turns a violent white-purple, and Boss’s mask starts to glitch as the electricity around them pulses and crackles.

They’re going down in a hurtle of light, and while Tommy can fucking *feel* his nerves patching themselves back together with every slip of static that gets past the insulation, he’s still not letting go. The gauntlet starts to whirl, and Boss’s attempts to free himself from Tommy’s grasp start to grow desperate, and Tommy pushes the two of them forward, towards the ground.

“*Tommy, let it go, your vitals are goin’ crazy!*” Techno says, sounding as panicked as Techno’s ever sounded, but Tommy just squeezes his eyes shut and braces for impact.

This’ll take Boss out, at the very least, and if Tommy manages to pull himself out and away in time, he can still go after the firearms. “*What the fuck are you doing?!*” Boss shouts, even more panicked than Techno and Tubbo’s frantic yelling going off on the comms. “*Let go! You’re gonna get us both killed!*”

Tommy hesitates, and for a brief moment, his hands slip from the gauntlet.

Unfortunately, this happens at the same moment the two of them hit the ground, and Tommy is immediately propelled back by the enormous shockwave that erupts on impact.

Coughing and sputtering as he attempts to stand, Tommy blinks. He can't fucking see *anything*, and everything's gone silent. Fuck, had he blinded himself?! Did the explosion deafen him?! Oh, Techno's gonna *throttle* him if he had. Thankfully, though, there's a click, and Tommy hears Tubbo's voice.

"The wave knocked everything out again! I think the power's down for good, Techno's gone to check the generator! Are you alright?! Tommy! Can you hear me?!" Tubbo screeches, and Tommy groans. *"Oh, thank fuck, thank fuck you're alive!"*

"It's gonna take more than-ah-more than a f-fuckin' zap to kill me," Tommy wheezes out, and Tubbo makes a noise of protest. Tommy's entire body won't stop trembling-probably the electricity-and he falls to his knees, lifting the bottom of his mask to empty his guts on the pavement. Tommy coughs and tugs his mask back down. "I-I think you guys... you might have to come g-get me...?"

"I'll tell Techno to pull the car around," Tubbo agrees immediately, and Tommy slumps against a lamppost, eyes fluttering shut as he sighs in relief. *"You keep fucking breathing, got it?! Don't die on me, or I swear to God, I'll kill you!"*

Tommy chuckles. "Yeah, I know, I'm... I-I'll be alright," he says, making an effort to keep his eyes open, even though Tubbo can't see through his camera right now. "Want me to keep talking 'til you guys g-get here?"

Tubbo makes a distressed noise. *"Yeah, bossman, just keep talking-Techno, he's stuttering, the shockwave must've gotten him bad, c'mon, we gotta get over there,"* he says, and Tommy takes a few deep breaths as his teeth start to chatter. It's fucking freezing. *"We're getting there in ten minutes, you just-describe the fireworks, don't stop fucking talking to me."*

"Okay," Tommy says easily, and he watches a rather pretty red one go off. "Oh, that one's... i-it's red, and it's really bright, s'quite

beautiful, actually...”

He keeps describing fireworks until he sees a familiar set of headlights.

Tommy smiles weakly and falls asleep.

Oh boy! Tommy's back at it again with the self-sacrificial tendencies.

stop almost-dying already!

Chapter 30: stop almost-dying already!

The aftermath of the blackout; Techno and Tubbo are concerned, Tommy is fed up with being coddled, and Wilbur is still a lovable idiot.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Tommy has been under strict observation by Techno and Tubbo for the past twelve hours, and it's starting to get kind of annoying.

"It's fuckin' cold as shit 'cuz the power's still off, *that's* why my teeth are chattering," he says flatly as Tubbo starts to make his stupid concerned face. Nobody's emergency generator is working either, so until the power goes back on, there's no way to properly monitor Tommy's vitals. And while Tommy *understands* the concern, he's fine! His body's recovered. "I'm serious, Tubs, I feel fine."

Techno scowls and shoves yet *another* blanket onto Tommy. It's quite a comical sight, now that Tommy thinks about it; Tubbo and Techno are both wrapped up in as many layers as humanly possible because they can't get any heat due to the outage. "You're *not* fine, though, no human being can be *fine* after an unholy shockwave like that," Techno grumbles, and Tommy makes a face.

"Okay, but I'm *super*-human, so how does that work?" he teases, and Techno and Tubbo both glare at him. Tommy puts his hands up by his chest and looks away with wide eyes. "Alright, alright, *Christ*, tough fuckin' crowd."

Tubbo pinches the bridge of his nose and his brows furrow. "What the fuck were you even *thinking* back there?! Was your train of

thought just, 'Oh, let me fucking throw myself onto an electric gauntlet, *surely* nothing can go wrong?!'” Tubbo snaps, and Tommy groans, tossing his head back on the pillows. They’ve barely even let him leave his bed. “It’s a good fucking thing classes are canceled until the power’s on.”

“I would literally rather be in Wilbur’s classroom being asked a boring question I don’t know the answer to right now than have to deal with this smothering,” Tommy tells him flatly, and Techno goes to smack him upside the head, but he hesitates. Oh, for fuck’s sakes, Tommy’s not *that* delicate, he’s perfectly fine. “Come to think of it, has anyone heard from Wil?”

Tubbo shakes his head, wrapping his parka tighter around himself. Techno sighs. “No, I couldn’t find him when the doors finally opened, his phone’s probably out of battery,” he says, and Tommy frowns. “In any case, I’m gonna go make us all some tea. Thank God we still have an old-fashioned kettle.”

Humming, Tubbo gives Techno a grateful smile, and Techno leaves the room. “If you so much as *breathe* wrong, I’m taking you to a hospital,” Tubbo threatens, and Tommy scoffs in exasperation, leaning back against the pillows again. Tubbo narrows his eyes. “I mean it, bossman. You can’t expect us to just be fine with you being so self-sacrificial! What if you’d died?! What if we hadn’t had the insulation installed yet?! That was a *lethal* amount of electricity, you’re lucky you only got out with a couple scratches!”

“Oh, *relax*, it turned out alright, didn’t it? And thanks to you, I *did* have the insulation. I’m fine, Tubbo, honestly,” Tommy says, but Tubbo’s worried expression remains. “Look, I know you’re kinda pissed-”

“I’m not *pissed*, I’m-! You *gotta* understand how this looks,” Tubbo says, and Tommy frowns in confusion. To him, it had just been a risky play, but it had worked, hadn’t it? Sure, Boss had been gone by the time Techno and Tubbo had gotten there, and sure, they’d found Tommy collapsed on the ground and twitching every so often, but it’s fine now! Tubbo clicks his tongue and crosses his arms. “Tommy, not only did you recklessly do something impulsive *again*, but you were treating your life like it’s nothing! Add that to the panic

attacks and the *clear* trauma you've experienced-

"Woah, woah, it's not like *that*, Big T," Tommy says as Techno comes back in with a tray of steaming mugs. Tommy takes the one that Techno hands him and winces when the scalding tea burns his tongue. "I'm just-it's easier to take risks when I know I can just... heal, y'know?"

Tubbo frowns, but he drops the subject. Techno presses his nose to his mug and sighs in relief; Tommy snorts at that, and Techno glares playfully at him. "What're *you* lookin' at?" he asks, and Tommy puts his hands up in mock-surrender. They sit in a relatively peaceful silence for a while, sipping on their tea and trying their best to keep warm.

Eventually, though, Tommy hears the front door open downstairs-he's the only one, perks of enhanced hearing and all that-and he sits up. "I think Wil's back," he whisper-yells, and Techno's eyes go wide. Tommy sets his almost-empty mug on his nightstand and makes to get out of bed, only to be stopped by Tubbo, who eyes him warily. Tommy rolls his eyes. "C'mon, man, just let me go make sure Wilbur's okay."

Tubbo relents, but he *does* stick annoyingly close to Tommy as the three of them make their way downstairs. Clingy bastard. "I'm home!" Wilbur shouts, and he sounds pretty irritated. Tommy bounds down the rest of the stairs two at a time, and he throws his arms around Wilbur's middle. Wilbur chuckles and ruffles his hair. "Hey, Toms. You look cozy."

Ah, right, Tommy's still got an absurd amount of blankets wrapped around him. He turns up his nose and pulls away from Wilbur. "Yeah, well *I'm* warmer than *you*, so I win," Tommy says, and Wilbur shakes his head fondly at him.

"It's not a competition, gremlin," Wilbur tells him, and Tommy flips him off. Tubbo still lingers close to Tommy's side, but Techno hangs back by the foot of the stairs. Wilbur seems to notice him for the first time, and he waves hesitantly. "Hey, Tech."

"Where were you?" Techno asks, cutting straight to the chase, and

Tommy steps back. He doesn't exactly want to be in the line of fire if this devolves into another argument. Wilbur's brows furrow, and Techno shifts uncomfortably. "I was worried."

Wilbur's face softens at that, and he smiles, albeit a little shakily. "I was staying over at Karl's place," he says.

"Not Sally's?" Techno jokes, and Wilbur fucking *glares* at him. Tommy glances between his brothers a little fearfully-well, not fearfully, Tommy is afraid of nothing, but seriously, there's some *fury* behind the look Wilbur's giving Techno right now. Techno puts his hands up placatingly. "My bad, my bad."

Wilbur sighs, and he heads into the living room, slumping down on the couch. Tommy, Tubbo, and Techno follow, Tubbo hovering at Tommy's shoulder as he sits in an armchair. "No, it's not your fault, I just... Sally and I had a pretty bad fight once we'd caught up to each other after all that chaos broke out," he explains, and Tommy tries *very hard* not to laugh.

Tubbo shoves his head to the side. So maybe Tommy hadn't been *entirely* successful at keeping his laughter in. "Ignore him, he's been a dick all day," Tubbo says, and Tommy makes a noise of offense, hand over his chest.

Leaning on the arm of the couch, Wilbur groans. "I fucked up *bad*, Tech. Why the hell am I so terrible with women?" he asks, and Techno gives his head a sympathetic pat. It's as outwardly comforting as Techno gets.

"What the fuck did you even *do*, Wil?" Tommy asks, and Tubbo elbows him. Tommy gestures towards Wilbur in protest. "The fuck are you nudging me for?! I'm just asking!"

Tubbo shrugs. "I felt like it," he says easily, and Tommy shoves him, shivering as a breeze manages to worm its way through his blanketed defenses. Tubbo's face immediately grows concerned. "Shit, you alright? You need another blanket, bossman?"

Tommy waves him off, sitting on the edge of his seat and gesturing for Wilbur to fucking talk already so he can distract Tubbo and

Techno from fretting over him. "Right, well, I met up with her once the crowd started to thin a little. And I was so *relieved* to see her, and I started to tell her that, but she got pissed at me because I 'ditched' her when the lights went off," Wilbur huffs, running a hand through his hair. "It's not like I meant to! I was just as panicked as everyone else, y'know? So I told her that, and she went 'that's not the point,' so I asked her what her point was, and she told me-get this-that I was clearly too *nervous* to be with her, and she doesn't want to be with anybody that can barely talk to her! And *then* she told me I've no right to be jealous when I'm-somehow-the one being immature! How fucked is that?!"

"I mean... she's got a point," Techno says, and Wilbur gives him a look of utter betrayal. Tommy stifles a laugh as Techno shrugs. "I'm just sayin', she's got every right to not want to be with you when you're not ready to be with her, man. You trip over yourself when she so much as *looks* at you, it's no wonder she doesn't think you're ready for anything serious."

The three of them stare at Techno, whose face quickly goes red. "Since when do *you* know anything about romance?" Tubbo asks, and Techno gives him a flat stare.

"Techno's got a thing for romance novels," Wilbur says easily, though he looks rather troubled now that Techno's pointed out Sally's perspective. He's quickly distracted at the gust of cold wind that blows in, though. "Shit, it's fucking *cold*, when's the power coming back on?!"

"Nobody knows yet, the power lines got fried," Tubbo says, sending Tommy a subtle glare, and he grins sheepishly. He hadn't *meant* to blow up London's electricity grid, it had just sort of happened that way. "Nobody's emergency generators are working anymore, either."

Techno rolls his shoulders. "Let me see if I can get a fire going," he says, and Tommy gets up, ready to follow him out to the backyard to help cut firewood, but Techno pushes him back down into the armchair, wrapping the blankets back around him tightly. Tommy scowls at him. "*You* are staying put and keeping warm. Someone make him some more tea."

Hopping up, Tubbo shoots Techno a thumbs-up. "On it," he says, and he scurries off to the kitchen as Techno points two fingers at Tommy and then down at the floor before heading into the backyard. *Stay put.* Tommy huffs in annoyance and sits back.

Wilbur leans forward, eyebrows raised in amusement. "Well, *someone's* being coddled today," he teases, and Tommy wrestles a hand out of the blanket cocoon to flip him off. Wilbur gives him a shit-eating grin and ruffles his hair. Tommy can't do anything about it. "Aww, look at the little blanket boy in his tiny blanket bundle!"

"I will bite your fucking hand off," Tommy threatens, only half-joking, and Wilbur squints playfully at him. The cold *is* kind of getting to him, though, so Tommy pulls his hand back into the blankets and squirms. "God, it's cold as shit. They better fix this soon..."

Tubbo comes back in with a cup of tea, and Tommy brings it carefully into the blankets. "You doin' alright, Toms?" Tubbo asks, quieter than he'd normally ask, and Tommy nods. He's pretty tired, and it's not as though the caffeine in the tea does anything, considering his stupid fucking metabolism. Tubbo's brow furrows, and he tilts his head. "Let's get you back to bed."

Tommy just nods, feeling a little sluggish. He'll just come back downstairs once Techno's got the fire going.

As it turns out, a three-day power outage does *not* agree with Tommy's superpowered biology.

Techno is quick to point this out on the third day. "You're probably so exhausted because spiders are cold-blooded, and they go into hibernation in colder months," he mumbles, eyes focused on the book he's reading; it's called *A Guide To Arachnids: Spiders, Mites, and More!* "Obviously, you're a *person*, not a spider, so it probably doesn't *directly* translate, but still."

Tommy just groans in response, burrowing further into the blankets. God, this fucking sucks, he's a goddamned *superhero*, he shouldn't be so easily defeated by cold weather of all things. It's apparently an

entertaining sight, because Tubbo cackles. “It’s *cold*, and I *hate it*,” Tommy grits out, and Tubbo just piles another blanket on him.

“I guess I’ll have to make your suit a little warmer for the holidays, then,” Tubbo teases, and Tommy sticks a hand out of the blankets to swat at his legs. He misses, and the cold makes him withdraw his hand *very* quickly. Tubbo bursts out laughing. “It’s like watching a cat swat at shit from under a bed!”

Techno hums, and Tommy squints at what little of his brother he can see through the gap in the blankets. “I will crush your bones,” he says in a bad impression of Slime, and Tubbo snorts, shoving at Tommy’s shoulder through the pile of blankets. “That guy was *weird*.”

“Of *course* he was weird,” Tubbo says easily, and from the sound of it, he’s probably gone to snoop around Tommy’s desk, “he was a three meter tall slime monster. The fuck else would you expect him to be?”

There’s a knock on the door, and Tommy groans, burying his face in a pillow. “Oh, hello, Tubbo, everything alright? You haven’t gone home in a few days,” Kristin says, presumably from the doorway, and Tommy turns his head to peek through the gap again. Kristin audibly stifles a laugh, and Techno steps aside to let her in. “Tommy? Are you under all those blankets?”

He narrows his eyes as she crouches down by the bed to be level with him. “I am cold,” he says simply, and she reaches a hand under the blanket to ruffle his hair. He yelps-her fingers are fucking cold-and scrambles back further into the pile. “Oi! Watch it, your hand is *freezing!*”

“Oh my God, he really *is* like a cat,” Techno remarks, and Tommy sticks one hand out from the blankets to flip him off again. “Disregardin’ the antics, what’s up?”

“Wilbur wants us all downstairs, he’s made soup,” she answers, and Tommy starts to gather his blankets around himself tightly so that he can remain wrapped as he stands. Kristin laughs, and he pouts at her. “Need some help getting there?”

Tommy turns his nose up. "I can manage perfectly well, thank you very much," he says, very nearly tripping as he takes a step towards the door. Tubbo stifles a laugh, leaning on Techno's shoulder. God, Tommy can't believe that these two *morons* are the ones who know his secret identity. He turns back to Kristin. "Please tell me Wil hasn't *experimented* again."

Chuckling, Kristin shakes her head. "Nah, we're in the clear. I still don't understand why he does that, though. His cooking's plenty good already," she says, and Tommy squints at the stairs. He wonders if he could wait until Kristin's out of sight and then swing his way down, that way he minimizes any contact with the cold floor-

Ah.

Techno has decided he doesn't want to wait, evidently.

"Let me down!" Tommy demands, squirming as Techno continues to fireman-carry him down the stairs. He tugs one hand out of the blankets and lightly pounds his fist on Techno's back, scowling at Tubbo, who's laughing so hard that he's clutching his sides. "Techno! This is *embarrassing*, put me down!"

"You can shuffle your way to the kitchen once there's no hazard of you fallin' down a flight of stairs," is Techno's answer, and Tommy goes limp in protest. This, unfortunately, does not stop Techno from continuing to carry him down and depositing him in a chair in the dining room. "If you don't wanna leave your cocoon, you gotta deal with the consequences."

Tommy groans and tilts his head back. There's no light to squint at; they're still without power, after all. "Any word on when the power's coming back on?" Tubbo asks, as if he's read Tommy's mind, and Tommy squints at Wilbur as he comes into the dining room with a *huge* pot of soup.

"I think they're still trying to get it back up, but it should be back sometime today. At least, that's what Quackity said in the faculty chat," Wilbur answers, and Tommy's brows furrow. He still feels a little guilty about ruining that night for Quackity's club. He supposes it's not *too* weird that Quackity's keeping updated on it, considering

his club was the source of the first outage.

Kristin sighs and takes a seat as Wilbur starts to pass out bowls. "They should really be careful, an outage of this size is worth investigating," she says, and Techno nods along. Tommy just starts to eat his soup; Wilbur had given him a serving first, which he begrudgingly appreciates. Maybe this'll warm him up a little.

Scoffing, Wilbur sets the pot back on the stove and comes back out to sit with them. "You know, I still think if Spider-Man hadn't pulled that stunt, we wouldn't be in this mess," he says, and Tommy *really* wishes that the news hadn't been fucking broadcasting to Twitter during his fight with Boss. "Even the guy he was *fighting* told him to cut it out-"

"I am fucking begging you not to talk about Spider-Man," Tommy says before Techno and Tubbo can start to tell Wilbur off. Wilbur looks vaguely offended, melodramatic bastard that he is, and Tommy glares at him. "I'm serious. Every time you do, it ends in a huge argument. I thought they managed to get you to shut the fuck up about it, but apparently you still hate the guy. And I legitimately don't give a shit. I genuinely do not care about anybody's opinions of Spider-Man, because I don't *care* about Spider-Man. Shut *up* about Spider-Man!"

Wilbur blinks at him. Techno and Tubbo exchange a look. "I didn't mean to upset you, Tommy, I didn't thi-"

"Well, it's a good thing you didn't upset me, because I don't care about Spider-Man," he cuts in, and Kristin gives him a concerned frown. Tommy just shovels some of the soup in his face and refuses to elaborate.

Techno clears his throat. "He's... a little fed up with the cold," he says, and while Wilbur's eye twitches-Tommy doesn't have the patience for this insecurity shit, frankly-he just nods and turns back to his own bowl. Techno stirs his soup around idly, and Tommy frowns. If Techno's not going to eat it, he could just give it here instead. Techno sighs. "So, is Phil still out?"

Kristin nods, seemingly relieved that the conversation topic has

changed. “Yeah, he’ll be back in a couple hours, he’s still talking with some clients whose projects are being put on hold for the time being because of the blackout,” she explains, and Tommy just picks up the bowl and straight-up drinks the rest of the soup. It’s getting too cold too fast, and he doesn’t want to waste the warmth.

“Table manners much,” Tubbo jokes, and Tommy scowls at him. The table falls into silence, and Tommy gives Wilbur a grateful nod as he pours him a second helping of soup. The five of them continue to avoid eye contact and eat.

“What if the power came on, like, right now?” Tommy asks as Wilbur’s spoon clinks just a *little* too loud against the bowl. “That would be funny, I think.”

Techno rolls his eyes. “Tommy, they’re not gonna come on for the sake of comedic timing-”

The overhead light flickers to life above the table.

Bursting into laughter, Tommy slaps the table, and relief floods him as the whirring of the vents fills the silence with glorious white noise. “Ha!” he shouts, pointing a finger at Techno.

“I stand corrected,” Techno says flatly.

Wilbur immediately dashes towards the living room, and Tommy sheds a few blankets to chug the rest of his second serving of soup and follow him. Wilbur’s switching on the news, which, granted, is not exactly Tommy’s go-to entertainment, but he’ll gladly take being updated on the situation over being left in the dark.

“-of course, power is being returned to residential districts as we speak. Water treatment plants, hospitals, and sewage systems were the priority of the city’s hardworking electric companies, and many of you may not see this broadcast for a while longer while power continues to be redirected towards the more highly populated areas of the city,” the news anchor says, and Tommy sighs in relief.

At least they’d prioritized getting power back to essential services first rather than trying to power the city back up as a whole. “*Quite a*

terrifying situation, I thought I might freeze to death in my own home," the other anchor says, and Tommy winces. He doesn't doubt there'll be people in the hospital for hypothermia. *"We go now to our field reporter, who is live at the scene of a rather spirited political standoff."*

The screen transitions to a shot of a few protestors being held back by what looks like private security, and there's a man—the guy from the video on Twitter a couple days back—standing next to the reporter on screen. *"Thanks, Richard! I'm here with mayoral candidate Schlatt, who has been handing out blankets to folks on the street. Mr. Schlatt, can we get your take on the blackout?"* the reporter asks, and Schlatt shakes his head solemnly.

"If I can be honest here, I think it's a damn shame and a real tragedy. These innocent people, the citizens of London, were endangered by the cold front, whether they're inside their homes or out of them," Schlatt says, and Tommy resists the urge to nod in agreement as The Sense idly pokes at the back of his brain, clearly telling him that this guy has bad vibes. Schlatt sighs on the television, and some of the shouts of the protestors can be heard, though they're still a little unintelligible considering how far away they are from the mic. *"If you ask me, no one should have to go through what the great city of London and its people have gone through for the past few days, especially not for some guy in a mask trying to play hero."*

Tommy's eyes slide shut in frustration, but he opens them after giving himself a brief moment to maintain his composure. He doesn't want to miss any of this. *"Are you of the opinion that Spider-Man is to blame for the blackout?"* the field reporter asks, and Tommy's hands ball into fists. Tubbo and Techno enter the living room, both clearly having heard what the reporter had just asked.

Neither of them look very happy about it.

Schlatt raises his hands in a very annoying, political-placation-type gesture, and Tommy crosses his arms. *"I mean, there's definitely blame to be had by the criminal who had been using the weapon, but... we've all seen the footage, haven't we? If the guy you're trying and failing to apprehend tells you not to mess with a highly*

dangerous weapon of unknown magnitude, I think it's pretty safe to assume you should back off. Then again, we haven't really seen Spider-Man make many decisions that are... thought through well."

Wilbur shifts uncomfortably, and Techno shoots him a glare. *"And is your campaign working to put a stop to Spider-Man's vigilante activities?"* the reporter asks, and Schlatt gives them a sardonic smile.

"We're working to prevent more tragedies like these from happening in the future, and the best way to guarantee the safety of the citizens of London is to ensure that anyone legally trained and equipped to protect this city is operating under the law," Schlatt answers, and it's such a bullshit answer that Tommy actually scoffs. *"Unfortunately, some of London's citizens seem too enamored with the mystery of a masked man claiming to be a superhero to properly assess the situation we're dealing with here."*

"This guy's full of fucking shit," Tubbo says angrily as the reporter tries to wean more information out of Schlatt, who continues to say a whole lot while simultaneously saying nothing. "He's fucking fear mongering! Spider-Man's not some evil mastermind that's only after fame, he's just trying to help! It's not as if the cops are equipped to handle fucking *supervillains*! They don't even do their damn jobs right half the time!"

Techno hums in agreement, and Wilbur's brows furrow. Tommy just keeps his gaze on the screen as the camera pans over to the protestors. The field reporter approaches them, and the girl in front looks pretty determined. *"Spider-Man has done nothing but help the people in our community,"* she says, one hand on the mic. *"He saved my mum from being mugged! She had her paycheck on her, y'know? He's the reason we made rent that month."*

Tommy's eyes go wide. He'd had no idea-he doesn't even know that girl, but apparently he'd made a big enough impact in her life that she's out on the street protesting the one politician who's openly expressed disdain for him.

A second protestor leans into the mic, and his eyes are narrowed with determination. Tommy actually recognizes this guy. *"I was in*

the bank when that heist went down. If it weren't for Spider-Man, I'd be dead," he says firmly. "My son wouldn't have a father without Spider-Man."

Holy shit.

Another protestor. *"Spider-Man got my cat down from an eleventh-story ledge! Not nearly as life-changing as some of the other stories,"* she says with a laugh, *"but that cat's been my best friend for ten years! He helps everybody, no matter how small their problems seem."*

"Politicians don't actually give a damn about us! Spider-Man's kind and brave, and he doesn't have this weird hero complex that Schlatt makes him out to have! He helps people with their groceries, for God's sake, he's just a helpful guy doing his best!" Niki says, and Tommy huffs out a quiet laugh in disbelief at seeing her on the news.

"He's our friendly neighborhood Spider-Man," Eret says from beside her, and Wilbur sits down numbly on the couch. Eret lowers their sunglasses and gives the camera a grin. *"He stopped an armed robber for me. Just a person in an alley. He could've kept swinging and found something more newsworthy to solve, but he didn't. He came to help when I needed him, even though nobody even knew who he was back then. I wouldn't have gotten to my job interview on time if he was only after big headlines. Might not even be alive at all. Schlatt's just plain wrong about him."*

The first girl holds up her sign-it says 'We love you, Spidey!'-and grins. *"Keep kicking criminal ass, Spider-Man! The people of London are with you all the way!"* she shouts, even as the reporter clearly tries to pivot the attention away from her and back towards Schlatt, whose phoney, photo-op charity stunt is still going on.

Tommy's breath catches in his throat. People like him. People *genuinely* like him. They don't think he's impulsive or attention-seeking. They think he's *helpful*. They'd called him *kind*.

They think he's *good*.

"They're right," Wilbur says, and Tommy, Tubbo, and Techno all turn to look at him in utter disbelief. "I... I think I was too harsh. Spider-Man's just trying to do good things for people, he's not-I mean, I still think he acts a little irrational and impulsive at times, and I do think a little criticism is warranted now and then, but... I honestly can't answer for what *I'd* do in his place without the privilege of hindsight."

Techno smiles-a genuine smile, and Tommy finds it contagious-and claps Wilbur on the shoulder. "I'm glad you've finally seen the error in your ways," he says, and Wilbur snorts.

Tommy feels like he's just won the fucking lottery.

Oh boy, gotta love some political unrest! Also, thank you guys so much for 1000 kudos??? Wtf???? That's absolutely insane, holy shit!!!

I am once again reading through the comments on the last chapter and grinning like an idiot because you guys are so sweet and supportive :)

tommy finally catches a fucking break

Chapter 31: tommy finally catches a fucking break

Alliumduo finally has a chat, and the crimeboys go to brunch.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

If there's anything Tommy can't stand, it's being bested in a game he's usually very good at.

But for some reason, today his hands are shakier than usual, and it means that Ranboo's able to down-B him off the stage and win by just a fucking hair. Tommy tosses the controller down in frustration and pouts. Ranboo's typically pretty shit with Kirby, too, which only serves to rub more salt in the wound.

Grinning, Ranboo sets his controller down too, and Tommy glares at him. "Good game!" he says, and Tommy shoves him. His hands are still trembling. Fuck. Ranboo seems to notice, and his brows furrow. "You alright? You're shaking."

"I'm fine," Tommy grumbles, standing and stretching his arms above his head. Ranboo switches the screen back to the home page and Tommy raises his brows at him. "You don't want to play another round? Scared your luck has run out, are you?"

Rolling his eyes, Ranboo shakes his head. "More like it's giving me second-hand embarrassment to watch you get crushed over and over again," he jokes, and Tommy kicks lightly at his thigh, a half-amused smile on his face. Ranboo nudges Tommy's shin with his elbow. "Seriously, though, you're really shaky."

Tommy gnaws at his bottom lip for a minute and glances over at his

bed; Henry and Clementine stare back at him. "That just... happens sometimes. I don't know why it does," Tommy confesses, and Ranboo frowns. Shrugging, Tommy walks over to the bed and picks up Henry. "It's stupid. I don't feel anxious or anything right now, I'm actually really at ease with you, so... yeah."

It's weird to be talking about this stuff, but he knows it's probably a good thing. After all, he would be there for Ranboo if he needed to talk, so it should be fine to ask Ranboo to be there for him, right? It's not like he's asking too much of Ranboo, is it?

The last thing he wants to do is burden any of his friends. Well, more than he already has, considering Tubbo's current side gig. Ranboo's perfectly safe from anything to do with Spider-Man; he doesn't even *like* Tommy's alter ego, and he's also been very clear about the fact that he wants nothing to do with Tubbo's guy-in-the-chair thing.

Tommy almost envies him.

Ranboo nudges Tommy's shin with his foot, snapping him out of his thoughts. "Who are you and what have you done with Tommy, you emotionally mature alien?" Ranboo jokes, and Tommy affixes him with a flat look. "Right. Sorry. I'm just not used to you actually being open without brushing it off as a joke."

A few moments of silence pass between them, and Tommy passes Henry back and forth in his hands. '*Confide in your friends, Tommy, it's good for you!*' he hears in the goofy voice Wilbur would use way back when they were really little kids to make Henry act things out. Snorting, Tommy puts Henry back down next to Clementine.

"When I was talking to that therapist guy, he, um... he made me realize that I've-I *have* been having panic attacks," Tommy admits. Ranboo blinks at him in surprise, but he *does* get up off the floor to sit next to Tommy on the bed. Tommy keeps his gaze on his hands in his lap. It kind of feels like if he looks at Ranboo while he talks, he'll lose his nerve and go back to brushing things off so as not to make him worry. "I don't know what's wrong with me, Ranboo, I... I'm sorry I kept telling you that I was fine, I think I was just-I was trying to convince myself."

The room is quiet again. Tommy momentarily panics; maybe he'd overshared, or maybe Ranboo hadn't actually wanted to hear him vent like that. Thankfully, though, he's drawn out of his spiraling by Ranboo's hand on his shoulder. "Hey, thank you for telling me," Ranboo says, so soft that it makes Tommy's chest seize with guilt. "I'm sorry you're going through something right now. If there's anything you need, you know I've got your back, right?"

Smiling weakly, Tommy playfully punches Ranboo's arm. "Yeah, yeah, you big sap, I know you do," he says, and Ranboo shoves his head. Tommy sighs and flops backwards on the bed, and Ranboo peers down at him. Tommy reaches up and pokes his forehead. "Pulling myself out of my own head is hard, but it's a lot easier when you and Tubbo are around, y'know? And if you tell him I said that, I *will* fucking kill you."

"He would never believe you were open and honest about your feelings with anyone, so even if I tried, he'd tell me I'm lying," Ranboo says, and Tommy makes a face at him. "How long d'you think it'll be until your hands stop shaking? Because I gotta admit, as fun as it is to absolutely annihilate you in Smash Bros, it feels like a hollow victory if it's not a fair fight."

Tommy snorts. "How noble of you to want a fair fight, oh great and wise Ranboo," he says flatly, and he sits back up. "I don't know, though. Could be a couple minutes, could be a couple hours. I mean, we don't have to work on school shit for a good long while yet, we could just grab food or something."

Ranboo gives him a thumbs-up, and Tommy nods, taking the lead and heading down to the kitchen, where Kristin and Phil are standing, Kristin against the counter and Phil stirring something by the stove. "Hey, kiddos," Kristin says, sipping her cuppa, and Tommy nods at her.

"Ayup, parents," he says, and he starts to search through the fridge, only to let out an indignant squawk when he realizes his leftovers from Techno's grilling the other day are half-gone. "Who the fuck ate my steak?!"

"That would be my bad," Phil says, and Kristin shakes her head

fondly. Ranboo gives Tommy's shoulder a sympathetic pat, and Tommy peers into the bowl Phil's currently tending to. It looks like brownie mix. "Don't worry, I'll let you have the spatula once I'm done."

Tommy makes a face. "Ew. I don't want that shit," he says, because he really doesn't. Phil always makes the brownies really sweet, which he used to love, but now, they're just fucking nasty.

Kristin's brows shoot up. "But you love brownies!" she says, and Tommy pretends to gag. He hands Ranboo a water bottle and keeps sifting through the food in the fridge. Kristin tuts and shoos him away. "You two sit, I'll make you something. You're gonna single-handedly ruin my shelf organization, I swear."

Hands up in surrender, Tommy goes to the kitchen table and sits, Ranboo following. "Right, well, not my fault there's nothing to eat," he says, and Ranboo kicks at his ankles. Phil waves the spatula in his direction somewhat threateningly. "Kristin! Phil's gonna hit me with a spatula!"

"Don't smack my son," Kristin tells him playfully, and Phil puts his hand over his heart in mock-offense. Tommy grins as Kristin hands him and Ranboo a bowl of popcorn. "There you go, now quit your complaining. We've got plenty of food, *you* just don't want to cook."

"Oh, but I'm so *bad* at cooking, Kristin, and you *must* protect me from Phil's utterly devastating lack of seasoning," Tommy pleads, and Phil actually *does* walk over to whack his hand with the batter-covered spatula. "Wh-! Fuck off, old man!"

Ranboo just chomps on the popcorn. Unbelievable. "This is ageism at its finest," Phil says, returning to his brownies, and Tommy does a very incredible and accurate impression of him while his back is still turned. "I'm not even that old!"

Kristin walks over to pat Phil's shoulder and presses a kiss to his cheek. Tommy sticks his tongue out and cringes. "You're getting up there, dear," she says, and Phil glares at her. Kristin gives him a shit-eating grin-it's surprisingly reminiscent of Wilbur's-and she turns back to Tommy and Ranboo with a warm smile. "How're you boys

holding up? Were things alright for you during the power outage earlier this week, Ranboo?"

"Yeah, I wasn't too cold. We just kept the fireplace on, and we were pretty much fine," he says, and Tommy takes a massive handful of popcorn. It's really fucking good. "I helped Tubbo light up the streets when the first outage happened, though! That was pretty fun, even if I'm still not sure he was being honest about how he got all those flares."

"Oh, that was him?" Phil asks, and Ranboo nods. Phil starts to pour the brownie batter into a pan. "He probably got into Puffy's boxes of navy stuff, then. I know she keeps a lot of things from the old days around just in case."

Tommy tilts his head in confusion as Kristin gives him a napkin to wipe the brownie batter off the back of his hand. "Why's she still got all that junk? You guys left the navy ages ago," he says, and Ranboo looks a little alarmed, like he hadn't known that Phil and Puffy are old friends. "No, yeah, Puffy and Phil go way back, man. Like, *stone age*."

"Alright, that's enough of the old jokes out of you," Phil cuts in, and Tommy snickers. Kristin stifles a laugh behind her hand, and Phil gives her a look of utter betrayal before turning back to Ranboo. "These two, I swear-but yeah, Puffy and I met as cadets, and she was eventually made captain of our squad; she was the youngest captain the navy's ever seen, matter of fact. When Kristin and I wanted to settle down, I told Puffy I wanted out, and she cleared the way for me to leave. She left not too long after, something about a dispute between a couple of higher-ups. We decided to stay in the same place so we could rely on each other's families if we ever needed to."

"She's actually the one who convinced your dad to get off his ass and propose," Kristin mutters to Tommy, and he stifles a laugh behind his hand. Ranboo looks rather enraptured with the story, and Kristin smiles. "It was honestly one of the best decisions we've ever made, to have our kids grow up alongside hers. Well, and Tubbo, of course. I *do* miss Jordan, though."

"He's a big fancy Peace Corps officer now, Kristin, he's got a world to be saving," Phil jokes, and Tommy snorts, chomping on some more popcorn. "You know, there was once a time where Puffy would've laughed at you for suggesting she'd settle down, but she seems much happier now. I know *I'm* a hell of a lot happier."

He slides the brownies into the oven and comes over to Kristin, one arm around her waist, and Tommy makes a face at them. "And there was once a time where you *weren't* gross," he says, and Ranboo snorts. "Leave room for Jesus, Phil."

Kristin bursts out laughing, and Phil closes his eyes and shakes his head. "Shut," he says, and Tommy narrows his eyes. "I swear, you're gonna make me go grey."

"Can't go grey if you go bald first," Tommy says, snatching up the bowl of popcorn and dashing out of the kitchen, and Ranboo scrambles to follow him as they dash up the stairs and back into Tommy's room. "Alright, boob boy, pick your controller back up, we're having a rematch now that my hands aren't fuckin' shaking anymore."

"Oh, you're *on*," Ranboo says, grinning.

Tommy is rather surprised to see Wilbur waiting for him in the kitchen, already dressed, with two steaming mugs of coffee the next morning.

Hesitantly smiling, Wilbur sets one of the mugs down across from him. "Good morning," he says, and Tommy hums as he sits and starts to sip the coffee. It's good. Wilbur makes really good coffee. Wilbur leans his chin on his palm and grins. "You're up early. Good thing, too, I was hoping to talk to you before I left."

Either the smell of the coffee is masking it, or Wilbur doesn't smell like cigarettes. Tommy's mouth quirks up in a soft smile. "I passed out way before I usually do," he admits, and Wilbur's brows furrow in concern. Tommy shrugs and swirls the coffee around in the mug. It's Kristin's favorite mug, the one with all the little moons and stars on it.

"It's fine. I was just sorta tired."

He's leaving out the fact that he'd been tired because he'd been fighting Slime again last night in an attempt to get back to the lab. Needless to say, he'd gotten back and been given an earful from Tubbo and had to sit still for an hour while Techno had patched him up. But Wilbur doesn't have to know any of that.

"You've been tired a lot lately, I've noticed," Wilbur says, and Tommy shrugs. They sip their coffee in silence. Tommy wonders why things still feel so awkward. Wilbur and Techno had apologized for fighting in front of him, so it should be settled, right? Tommy shouldn't still feel so... angry about everything. It's been fixed. It's been solved. Hasn't it? He's taken out of his thoughts by Wilbur's hand on his. "I know you're going to therapy now, but you can still talk to me about anything, y'know?"

"I know, Wil," Tommy says. He doesn't *want* to tell Wilbur everything, though. He's put enough people he cares about in danger, he can't do it to Wilbur too. His grip on the mug tightens slightly, but he catches himself and tries to chill out. He can't go breaking Kristin's favorite mug, after all. "So, um. How's Niki and Eret and all them?"

Wilbur's smile wavers. "Uh, they're... they're good. We're all gonna meet up for breakfast in a bit if you want to come with me, I'm pretty sure Niki's inviting someone new, too," he says, and it's painfully obvious that he's trying to sound as chipper as he can. Tommy just nods. He's not got any plans today. Wilbur swallows another bit of coffee and frowns. "Tommy, can I ask you something?"

"Shoot, Big Dubs," Tommy says, and he downs the last dregs of his own coffee. He doesn't see why not, so long as it's nothing crazy.

"How can I be a better brother?" Wilbur asks, and Tommy blinks at him. Well, *that's* not what he'd expected. Apparently, his need for context must show on his face, because *Wilbur's* face goes all pinched as he puts the mug down on the table and sighs. "I just... I've clearly been pretty shit at it lately, and I don't like thinking that we're not as close as we've always been. A-And this isn't, like, because of Techno or anything-I'm over that, I was being stupid,

obviously. It feels like... it feels like addressing that didn't *fix* it."

Tommy thinks about it for a minute. He *wants* it to already have been solved, he doesn't really know *how* to solve it. It's not as if Wilbur's the problem anymore, either, this is all on Tommy and his alter ego. Things would be so much less complicated if he weren't a superhero. If it were Wilbur who had found out instead of Techno, his life would be so much easier.

Well, probably not. Wilbur would *never* have let him keep being Spider-Man because he's an annoyingly overprotective bastard who still thinks Tommy's in primary school or some shit.

Okay, maybe Tommy's still holding a *tiny* bit of a grudge over the fact he and Techno can't do fight training anymore.

"Wilbur, there's just... there's some stuff that I just *can't* talk to you about," Tommy says, and Wilbur's brow furrows. Okay, clearly that's not exactly the right thing to say here. Tommy shakes his head and lets out a half-sigh, half-groan. "That's not what I-I just *meant* that I wanna keep some things to myself, you know? Of *course* I trust you, and I know that you're always going to be there for me, because you're my brother n' all that. I just... some stuff is my own to deal with. Plus, it's not like *you* tell *me* about everything."

"Well yeah, but that's because you're still a kid, of course I wouldn't make you worry about boring adult stuff," Wilbur says, and Tommy squints at him. Wilbur clicks his tongue. "I mean, do you *want* to hear me bitch about my income tax?"

Tommy snorts. "Obviously not, but that's the point, innit?" he says, and Wilbur huffs. "I'm sure *you* don't wanna hear about stupid teenager crap, not when you've gotta hear it in your classroom all the time anyway."

Tutting, Wilbur stands to grab more coffee. Tommy whines and waves his mug in the air, and Wilbur rolls his eyes. He pours Tommy more coffee anyway and passes him some creamer. It's vanilla-hazelnut. Tommy makes a face, but he puts just a splash in anyway. Can't hurt to have a *little* sugar.

As Wilbur sets the coffee pot to brew again-probably for Kristin, Phil, and Techno whenever they happen to wake up-he nudges Tommy's ankle with his foot. "I always wanna hear about your stupid teenage bullshit. Well, not *always*," he amends, "sometimes I'm in a shit mood. But other than that."

"Yeah, well... not *every* teen angst bullshit thought of mine needs to be shared. The miniscule amount of respect I have for your opinion of me prevents me from sharing every detail of my life," Tommy jokes, and Wilbur chuckles, sipping from his mug. "So... is *Sally* gonna be at this breakfast?"

Wilbur groans and puts his free hand over his face. "She told the group chat she wasn't going to be there because she had 'other plans,' but I'm pretty sure she just doesn't want to be in the same room as me," he grumbles, and Tommy stifles a laugh. Wilbur glares at him. "Don't fucking laugh at me, prick, I'm seriously at a loss here, I don't know what to do!"

"Suck it up and apologize to her, big man," Tommy says as he stands, and he chugs the rest of his coffee. With a satisfied sigh, he puts his mug in the sink and gives Wilbur's arm a pat. "Let's get going, shall we?"

An eyebrow raised, Wilbur gestures vaguely at him. "You're in joggers and a t-shirt, dickhead," he says, and Tommy squints.

"And just *what* is your point? You don't exactly *scream* formal with the stupid little ghosts on your jumper in *November*," Tommy points out, and Wilbur sighs before setting his half-empty mug in the sink and leading the way out the door.

Wilbur's car is one of those super-safe ones. He'd gotten it at a used car dealership this past summer, and Tommy still thinks that the red is atrocious. "You say a single word in bad faith about Jubilee and I will kick you in the throat," Wilbur says as he slips into the driver's seat, and Tommy puts his hands up by his chest in mock-surrender.

"I have never insulted Jubilee *once*," he lies blatantly as he gets into the passenger seat. He doesn't even have to adjust it much, which is nice. It probably means Kristin and Phil haven't been in Wilbur's

car recently.

Affixing Tommy with a flat look, Wilbur pulls the car out of the driveway and starts to head out on the road. "You have done nothing but criticize Jubilee since the *day* I got her," he says, and Tommy grins. Wilbur turns onto a main street, and Tommy glances out as they start to get closer to the busier part of the city. Wilbur drums his fingers on the steering wheel. "Red's not even an ugly color, I don't know why you always insist that it is."

"Because it's ugly when it's *Jubilee*," Tommy says, and Wilbur flips him off as they make a right turn. "Jubilee is the ugliest car I've ever been in. You don't even have seatwarmers! *Techno's* car has seatwarmers."

"Techno's car was twenty-thousand pounds and paid for by his leftover university fund," Wilbur corrects. They start to pull into the parking lot of a cozy-looking diner. "And Techno's super anal-retentive when it comes to his car, he hasn't even *got* a name for it."

Tommy shakes his head. "He *does*, the car's name is Spud," he says, and Wilbur scoffs. And Tommy agrees that it's a stupid name, but at least it's got decent bluetooth. Wilbur puts the car in park, and Tommy bounds out, already heading into the diner before Wilbur can stop him. He spots Niki, Sam, Eret, Karl, and someone else he doesn't recognize sitting at a table, and he waves a hand above his head. "Ayup, fellas!"

Niki lights up, and she drags another chair over from a neighboring table for Tommy to sit down in. "Oh, hey, the kid's here!" Sam says, turning away from his conversation with Eret and Karl, and Tommy beams at him. Sam ruffles his hair, and Tommy huffs. "How've you been holding up?"

"I'm doing amazingly, thank you, Samuel," Tommy says, and Sam rolls his eyes, but he passes Tommy one of the untouched glasses of water. Niki passes him some coffee, and Tommy downs it in one gulp. Maybe three cups of coffee will finally be enough to push through his metabolism and have *some* kind of effect. Wilbur starts to approach the table, and Tommy throws an arm around Niki's shoulders. "Niki, would you agree that Wilbur's car is ugly as fuck?"

Wilbur narrows his eyes. Niki nods solemnly, and Tommy cackles. Huffing in exasperation, Wilbur sits next to Eret and points at Niki. "You're only biased because you find Tommy entertaining and won't have to listen to him brag about being 'right' for the next four days," he says, and Niki shrugs in faux-innocence.

Eret pats Wilbur's shoulder sympathetically. "You'll survive," they say, and Wilbur gives them a withering glare. "In any case, you two still haven't introduced yourselves to Jack."

Tommy turns to look at the guy he hadn't recognized. "Name's Jack Manifest," he says, sticking his hand out, and Tommy shakes it. Wilbur shakes Jack's hand as well, and Tommy gives Niki a wary glance; she just smiles gently. Alright, so this guy's got no bad vibes. Tommy trusts Niki's intuition. Jack stretches his arms above his head. "I'm a detective."

Ah, so *that's* why Tommy's so on-edge. He hasn't felt somewhat comfortable around a cop since before he'd become Spider-Man, and he *especially* distrusts them now that they'd pointed their guns at him when he'd just been trying to help. "Well, that's definitely a choice," he says, and Niki elbows him. "I'm just saying!"

"I don't work with the cops, I'm a private eye," Jack explains, and Tommy nods. That's slightly tolerable. Interesting, even. Jack squints at Tommy. "Why do a bunch of teachers hang out with some kid?"

"He's my brother, unfortunately," Wilbur says with no malice, and Tommy kicks at his shins under the table. Sam chuckles, and Eret tips their glass. "For some reason, they don't find him nearly as annoying as I do, so he's—"

"Our collective little brother," Niki finishes for him, and she playfully digs her knuckles into the top of Tommy's head. He squirms out of her grasp and pouts at Sam as he laughs. "Sometimes we kick him out, though."

Eret nods sagely. "We're fond of the child, but not *that* fond," they say, and Tommy scowls at them. "Speaking of, Wilbur, am I allowed to bring him to bring-your-kid-to-work day?"

"Nobody is taking me *anywhere*, that legally counts as kidnapping," Tommy protests, and Eret grins at him.

Niki shakes her head. "No, no, if anyone were gonna get away with kidnapping you, it'd be Sam. He's too milquetoast for anyone to suspect him," she says, and Tommy cackles.

Sam just sighs and sips on his coffee. "I would rather *not* spend any extended period of time with the kid who once started a chant of 'program that ass' in my classroom," he says, and Tommy scoffs in offense.

"*Excuse* me, but that was actually hilarious," he says, and Sam gives him a placating nod. At Karl's bewildered expression, Tommy decides to elaborate. "There was a kid who made his project about a donkey."

Jack hums and nods. "Ah, so you're painfully unfunny, good to know-"

"Oh, you fucking *asshole*," Tommy interjects, and Jack wheezes. Niki stifles a laugh behind her hand, and Wilbur chuckles lightly. The waitress comes over, and Tommy beams at her. "One coffee and all the bacon you've got, please!"

Wilbur shakes his head. "You and your fuckin' bacon," he mutters as Sam puts in an order for six full English breakfasts for the table. The waitress turns to Wilbur, and he smiles. "Just another coffee, thanks."

Karl peers over at Tommy and gives him a little wave. Tommy waves back. Sam nudges Karl and grins. "So... how are you and Sapnap and Quackity?" he asks, and Karl glares playfully at him, shoving his shoulder.

"I think the more important question here is how are you and *the doctor*?" Karl shoots back, and Sam flips him off. Karl turns back to Tommy and he smiles. "Anyways, we're glad to have you here with us, Tommy."

Right. That's... weirdly nice of him to say. Wilbur snaps his fingers.

"Oh, that reminds me! Karl, thanks again," he says, rather sincerely, and Tommy's brow furrows. Karl just nods and looks away. Tommy looks to Wilbur for an explanation, but he's already turned to Eret to talk about something.

Sam slides over some fruit, and Tommy picks out a couple of grapes; not too sweet, not too bitter. Perfect. "So, have you and your groupmates finished your-"

Tommy holds up a hand. "Ah! No school talk!" he says, and Sam rolls his eyes fondly.

Niki giggles. "Yeah, Sam, you know the rules," she teases, and Tommy turns his nose up triumphantly.

As the waitress brings around the drinks-and a massive plate of bacon for Tommy, which he very much appreciates-the conversation settles into light, happy banter. Tommy honestly likes Wilbur's friends a lot; they're all really good people, and they really do care about him. That's always a nice feeling.

Especially when he knows at least two of them care about his alter ego as well. He'd saved that clip of Eret and Niki defending Spider-Man to his computer. Tommy would never admit to it, but he's watched it about fourteen times since it had aired.

Tommy's really grateful for the support; he's admittedly been a little nervous since Schlatt had started his campaign for the emergency election, but it seems like for the most part, the citizens of London are on his side. Well, maybe there are some parties that are more neutral than definitively biased.

But Wilbur's really getting there.

He'll get there eventually.

Tommy hopes he will, anyway.

Tommy's finally talking about his feelings *and* he's bonding with Wilbur! Progress, people, progress.

Also, I saw some of y'all speculating on whether or not Schlatt could even feasibly run for mayor of London, and rest assured, that issue's gonna be addressed ;) Our good pal Jack Manifold is on the case.

bruh

Chapter 32: bruh

Tommy infiltrates Boss's headquarters and finds out some rather unsavory information.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Tommy is *exhausted*.

It's his fifth attempt at getting back into the laboratory-he and Tubbo had decided to try and get in through the lesser-known tunnels of the sewer this time, to be more discreet-and he's being thrown around by Slime yet again. But that's not even the worst part! The *worst* part is that Vos is with him, and Tommy's arms are *bleeding*.

Very badly.

Tubbo is in quite a tizzy about it, as a matter of fact.

But this is important. And Tommy reminds himself of this as he's thrown into the wall of the sewer tunnel yet again, slime dripping off of his hands and being drawn right back to the giant, lumbering symbiote. "I can do this *all* day, pal!" he shouts, and Vos scoffs at him, still brandishing that stupid staff and twirling it idly by his side like he's come straight from colorguard practice.

"*Uh, no, you can't, you're horribly injured,*" Tubbo says flatly, and Tommy rolls his eyes. He's *fine*. A little bruised, sure, a little slashed up, definitely, but he can take it! "*Just make a break for the lab and stop fighting, Tommy, seriously. You can outrun them.*"

"Give up, little spider," Slime says, and Tommy makes a face. This

whole song and dance is a goddamn ordeal, and he's really starting to get tired of it. "We will crush your bones into dust and then absorb what remains."

Vos huffs. "No, you will *not*, because we've got strict orders to take him to headquarters *alive*," he hisses, quiet enough that a normal person wouldn't hear, but thank God for Tommy's enhanced senses. Fucking *finally*, it's been a while since they'd come in handy. Vos takes a few steps forward as Tommy struggles to stand. "Let's finish this."

Tommy mumbles a few swears and positions himself in a defensive stance. His ribs are aching, but if he can manage to get out of the sewer tunnel, he can tell Tubbo about what he's overheard, and Tubbo can track down the base of the entire operation. Vos starts towards him, and Slime roars. It shakes the walls of the tunnel.

Dodging as Vos's staff comes down hard against the stone wall he'd been standing in front of, Tommy whips out a web at the opposite wall and makes a mad dash to wrap it around Slime's ankles. Or, presumably, where his ankles would be if he were a person and not an amalgamation of symbiote matter and... whatever the fuck is holding his actual body together.

As Vos wrenches his blade from the concrete, Tommy yanks as hard as he can on the web, and Slime falls directly on Vos, who yells out in alarm. "Hah! Suck on that you-oh, *shit*, you're getting up, gotta go, bye!" he yells over his shoulder as he dashes towards the ladder to the manhole. He sticks a web to it and pulls it down. He'll apologize to the infrastructure workers later.

For now, though, he just leaps out of the sewers and starts to swing down the street. "*What the hell are you doing?! We could've gotten back into the lab if you'd just run for it!*" Tubbo protests, and Tommy just scoffs. "*Right, wait, you're horribly injured. Let's get you back home-*"

"No!" Tommy says firmly, and Tubbo lets out a huff in disbelief. "I'm serious, Tubbo, I know the mic didn't pick it up, but I heard Vos say something about them capturing me and taking me to their 'headquarters,' we can find them and shut them down now!"

Tubbo claps his hands. *"Fuck yeah! I'll start pinpointing possible locations,"* he says, and his typing starts up. *"Any ideas on where it could be?"*

Humming thoughtfully, Tommy swings to the top of a building and perches there. "Well, I've mostly been fighting them in that abandoned quarter, you know the one," he says, and Tubbo's typing gets faster. "I'm thinking that they'd want to stick close to their base of operations, just in case something goes wrong, right?"

"For once in your life, you might be on to something," Tubbo mutters, and Tommy lets out a scoff, hand over his chest in mock-offense. Tubbo's typing pauses, then there's a few clicks, and Tommy watches a bird shit directly onto a poor pedestrian's head as they try to get into their car to no avail. He snorts. Tubbo claps, delighted, and Tommy winces at the volume. *"I've got it! It's right underneath the building you fought Vos in, it's a pretty big underground facility. Let me pull up the building plan so I can guide you through the vents."*

Tommy groans as he starts to swing towards the abandoned quarter. "I have to crawl through *more* vents? Seriously?" he whines, and Tubbo snorts out a laugh as his typing starts up again. If there's anything shittier than shimmying his way through a vent system, Tommy doesn't want to know what it is. He lands atop the building he'd fought Vos in-or, well, the remnants of the top of it, anyway. That explosion from Blaze's drones had taken out a good chunk of it. "Right, where am I headed, Hive?"

"You're gonna wanna head down the vent on the first landing of the stairs, it's a straight shot down to the facility and I can guide you from there," Tubbo says, and Tommy grumbles a few swears under his breath as he heads down to the vent. This is gonna be a pain in his ass. Not to mention he'll probably have to roll lint off his suit when he gets home.

Slowly making his way down the shaft of the vent, hands and feet stuck to the sides so that he doesn't fall to his death. It's a very long way down. "Good thing I'm not afraid of heights anymore," Tommy mutters, and Tubbo laughs.

Finally, *finally*, Tommy manages to get down to the bottom of the vent, and he carefully comes off of the walls, keeping his movements as silent as possible. *"Okay, now you're gonna take three rights, one left, another two rights, go straight ahead for three forks in the path, and then take another two lefts,"* Tubbo says, and Tommy blinks. Sighing, Tubbo starts typing again. *"I'll just have the directions pop up when you need them."*

Tommy grins and starts to make his way through the maze. The feeling of getting turned-around is always prevalent, but Tubbo's little direction notifications make Tommy feel a bit more at ease; he feels like he somewhat knows what he's doing, which is still a relatively new thing for him. He can hear quite a lot of noises, mostly mechanical, and he shudders to think how many weapons are being produced right below his very nose.

"Right, I'm almost to the vent you want me to be at," Tommy whispers, and Tubbo's typing starts up again. He's probably hacking into the security cameras or something. Tommy can hear voices—they're probably not picking up on the mic yet—and he crawls closer to where Tubbo's directed him. "Okay, I'm right above the room now."

"Good, I'm gonna turn up your mic so we can pick up the conversation. I've put you right above the room they'd planned the most outlets and air conditioning for, I'm assuming there's lots of computers and valuable information there," Tubbo says, and Tommy's got to admit that's a smart play. *"Are any of our usual guys down below?"*

"I can't see for sure, but I think I hear Boss," Tommy mumbles, crawling forward to the second grate. Aha! There are three people there, and while he can't be *sure* that it's Boss, Vos, and Slime, the LED mask laying on one of the various computer consoles is definitely convincing.

The one closest to the mask—Tommy's just going to assume it's Boss because of his general demeanor and the fact that the other two are standing together, clearly awaiting his opinion—slams his hand on the console and shouts in frustration. "I've had enough! Both of you are complete morons, I can't believe you let him get away!" he roars,

and yeah, that one is *definitely* Boss. Boss shoves at one of the guy's shoulders. "You've both failed me *again*. What the hell am I meant to tell our employer, huh?!"

The one he'd shoved shifts uncomfortably. "I... apologize for our failure, but in all fairness, it's not as though *anyone's* been able to take him in alive, not even you," he says through gritted teeth, and Tommy tries hard not to laugh. Frustrated at being called incompetent? That's Vos for sure. Vos rolls his shoulders. "Boss, I think we should ask for more tools-"

"Absolutely not," Boss cuts in firmly, and Vos visibly grows frustrated. Tommy winces sympathetically; Vos always seems to get brushed off. "We've asked for too much already, and they've given us a hell of a lot of tools to get the job done. Slime!"

Something-a weird, green creature-emerges from the other guy's shoulder, winding gleefully around Boss's arm. "Hello, Boss! The little spider has escaped again, but not to worry! We will absorb him soon," it says, and Tommy shudders. He would rather not be absorbed, thanks. The creature stretches up to the side of Boss's face. "My host is... ideal for binding, but he is holding back. He does not seem to want to hurt the boy."

Boss sighs, and he leans back against the console. If his head weren't down, Tommy would be able to see his face. "Trust me, I don't want to hurt the kid either. For as much trouble as he's giving us, he's doing good work for the rest of the community," he says, and Tommy doesn't know whether to feel flattered or offended that a villain thinks he's doing good things. "Don't eat him or whatever, we're under strict orders to deliver him *alive*."

"I wish you'd let me use my guns and not that stupid staff, I'm so much better as a marksman than a bo staff fighter," Vos mutters, and Tommy's eyes go wide. That would explain it. When Boss and Slime turn to look at him, clearly horrified, Vos puts his hands up placatingly. "I'm trained enough to know where non-lethal areas are! We could subdue him and *then* bring him in, that's all I'm saying!"

"We're not shooting a kid," Boss tells him firmly, and Tommy feels a bit relieved. "Our employer's already letting his other guys do it, but

even if it's non-lethally, I don't want us to stoop that low. It's also clear we're not getting that file back-I'll take the heat for that, don't worry-and there's probably nothing in that lab that the kid doesn't know already. I'll tell him there's no point in trying to keep the kid from going back there."

Vos steps forward, stance angry. Tommy winces. This guy's backtalk is gonna get him into serious shit. "What the hell are we supposed to be doing, then?! Are we going to have to chase him around the city until we catch him?!" he demands, and Boss gives him a look that makes him take a few steps back. "I don't mean to be disrespectful, Boss, but... I can only take this stupid cover for so much longer, I *hate* working in that godforsaken building."

Tommy squints as Slime-or Slime's host, he supposes-shifts uncomfortably. "I kind of like it," he says, and Tommy's rather surprised to hear such a meek and cheerful voice from a dude that's thrown him around the sewers like a goddamned yo-yo. "I mean, we have friends now! That night at the club was so much fun! I got to dance with Sam from the computer lab and Sally from the gym!"

Oh *shit*.

Tommy knows that weird way of addressing people.

He knows it *very* well.

Charlie is that giant slime monster.

Fuck.

Boss looks up in exasperation, and Tommy feels nauseous. That's *Quackity's* face turned up at the ceiling. "I really like our jobs, too, I'm not going to blow our cover. Besides, there's plenty of people I care about at that school," he says, and Tommy whimpers quietly, trying not to scream in horror because that's *Quackity* saying that, it's *Quackity* who has the ability to level a city block with a shockwave, it's *Quackity* who had thrown him into buildings and shocked him so hard it took out the power in the entire city.

"Oh my God, oh my God, what the fuck, that's fucking Quackity what

the fuck?!" Tubbo cries out, and Tommy winces at the volume of it. Yeah, he fucking *knows* it's Quackity, he's looking right at him! *"Oh, shit, I can't stop the-Tommy, get out of there."*

"What?! What the fuck are you on about?!" Tommy hisses, but he gets the sneaking suspicion that Tubbo's decided to partake in a shenanigan or two when all of the screens in the room start to power on.

Quackity, Charlie, and Vos-Tommy's still not sure about him, but his best guess is Fundy, considering the fact that he's a ginger-all get into defensive stances, Slime hovering by Charlie's shoulder. Tommy still can't quite wrap his mind around the fact that the guy who couldn't even hold a ten-kilo bowling ball is the one who's been *throwing him around in the sewers*.

The gauntlet, *Quackity's* gauntlet, the same one that had punched Tommy through walls, lights up, and indigo lightning crackles around his arm. "What the fuck is going on?!" he demands, and Tommy's eyes go wide as the same video is pulled up on each screen.

Tommy is going to throttle Tubbo.

Bruh Sound Effect #2 is the video displayed on every fucking screen Tommy can see.

The entire fucking facility shakes with the sheer volume of it.

It's set to loop.

"I don't know whether to laugh or cry," Tubbo shouts, and Tommy starts to crawl back through the vents, glad that Tubbo'd had the sense to program them the other way around as well. He'd normally be laughing his ass off at Tubbo's stupid prank, but his brain is understandably a little scrambled right now.

"What the fuck were you thinking?!" Tommy demands, and as it turns out, Tubbo had not only hacked into every screen in the room, but every screen in the goddamned *facility*, because the looping *'bruh'* doesn't get any quieter. "Are you fucking kidding-did you-what the *fuck?!"*

"I thought it would be funny, but then our teachers turned out to be supervillains!" Tubbo says frantically, and his typing starts up again. The building suddenly goes eerily quiet. *"Oh my God, you don't think Quackity will know you're in the vents, do you?"*

Tommy's about to tell him that no, of *course* Quackity wouldn't know, but then the vent starts to shake. "Oh, *fuck*," he mutters, and the vent falls from the ceiling. Groaning, Tommy stands, and he's thankfully in what seems to be a storage room, though Quackity is standing right in front of him, LED mask back on. "Well, hello, Boss! Fancy meeting you here!"

"Did you fucking hack into my system just to blast the word 'bruh' over every speaker?" Quackity demands, and Tommy laughs nervously. The gauntlet pulses by Quackity's side. This is an absolute mindfuck, and Tommy will probably process all of this later, but Tubbo's wonderful little prank might get him fried, so that's his main concern right now.

"I may or may not have wanted to have a bit of a laugh," he lies, and Quackity's eyes narrow. Oh, boy. It's not fun to fight supervillains, but it's *really* not fun to fight supervillains when they happen to be part of the administrative staff at his school. "Right, well, I'll be on my way, the cops'll be seizing your firearm production shortly, have a lovely day!"

He tries to swing up into the vent shaft again, but Quackity grabs his ankle and slams him back down again. Tommy will not be looking him in the eyes in the hallway anymore. "Not so fast, Spider-Man," Quackity says, and Tommy makes a face. "I'm gonna have to take you to my employer."

Tommy scoffs. "Uh, no, you will *not*," he says, and he ducks a punch. He webs up Quackity's other arm and dodges another punch from the gauntlet, wincing when electricity grazes his face just barely. "Speaking of, care to tell me who it is that wants me kidnapped?"

Pixelated grin rather manic, Quackity charges up the gauntlet more. "Sorry, Spidey, I signed an NDA," he says, and Tommy tries *very* hard not to laugh at how dorky he sounds. Right, this is his

headteacher-slash-supervillain he's dealing with here. Quackity throws another punch, and Tommy jumps back. "C'mon, man, don't make this harder than it has to be!"

"Funny thing is, I don't actually want to be here! I was just on my way out, as a matter of fact," Tommy huffs, jumping out of the way of yet another electrically-charged punch, and he flips himself up into the vent shaft again. "Right, then, see you next time you terrorize the citizens of London! I've gotta go."

Quackity fucking *leaps* and grabs the entrance to the vent with both hands, charging up the gauntlet until the entire vent shaft crackles with electricity. "You *really* gonna try going through while it's a death trap?" he sneers, and Tommy blinks.

"Yep! Rubber inlayer, motherfucker!" Tommy says, and he makes a break for the nearest open vent further down. He lands himself in what looks like an engineering lab, and several of the workers freeze up.

Quackity breaks through the wall, which is *really* annoying, because Tommy had been hoping to just up and run out. A few of the workers turn the guns they're working on towards him, and Tommy sticks his hands up. Quackity groans. "No, you morons, don't shoot!" he orders.

Tommy dashes for the door, shouldering it open and running down the hall. This is insanely taxing, especially considering the absolute crisis he's going through. Tommy's probably not gonna get over that one for a while. "*Two rights and you'll reach the emergency ladder to the top,*" Tubbo says, sounding slightly dazed still. Not that Tommy can blame him, his own head's still reeling. "*I would've directed you to the elevator, but... that's not really an option when you're being chased.*"

Thankfully, Tommy's a hell of a lot faster than Quackity, and he's about to start climbing when he hears a few crashes behind him. "If you *touch* that ladder, so help me God," Quackity snarls, and Tommy groans.

"Come on, man, just let me go home," he says, getting into a

defensive stance nonetheless, and Quackity's gauntlet powers up again. This is incredibly frustrating. Tommy's so fucking *tired*, he's already lost a ton of blood, and he just wants to be done with today. "Alright, *fine*. Let's not pull punches, then."

As Quackity's pixelated grin gets wider, Tommy steadies himself on his back foot. "*Wait, you're not seriously going to not pull punches?!*" Tubbo demands, and Tommy just keeps his focus on Quackity. "*Tommy, you're gonna break his bones!*"

"So be it," Tommy whispers, and Quackity dashes forward. Tommy darts to the side as Quackity throws an electrified punch *right* by his head. Tommy grabs his arm and twists it behind his back, sweeping a leg out and forcing him down to his knees. Quackity fucking betrayed him, betrayed his *trust*, and now he thinks Tommy's going to let him off easy?! No way in hell. He wrenches Quackity's arm, and something *pops*. Shit. Quackity cries out, and Tommy shoves him down. "The next time I tell you to let me leave, maybe, just *maybe* you should listen, yeah?"

"You dislocated my shoulder!" Quackity says, clearly bewildered, and Tommy rolls his eyes. He knows from experience that it doesn't hurt *that* bad. After the first couple of times, anyway. Four is, like, the cutoff for the pain threshold. Quackity's eye twitches, and he fires off a shock of lightning at Tommy.

It hurts-not as much as it would without the rubber inlayer, but still-and Tommy winces as he starts to climb the ladder. Quackity fires off another as Tommy climbs higher, but The Sense warns him in time. It's not as if Quackity can follow him up, not with a bad arm, so Tommy fires off a web as soon as he sees the top and pulls himself up to make the leap.

"*That was over quickly*," Tubbo says, back to dazed, and Tommy gives him a firm nod as he swings out over the city. He's fucking *fed up* today, and while he's pretty sure it's mostly because he doesn't know how to deal with the fact that a man he looks up to is actually the shitbag that's been beating the hell out of him, he's also got a feeling that the other shit that's happened to him over the past few months hasn't helped. "*Why don't you do that more often?*"

"Because-as hard as this may be to believe-I didn't become a superhero with the goal of causing people bodily harm," Tommy mutters, heading straight for his house. God, he could really use a nap. "Also, the only reason it was that easy was because we caught him off-guard, they weren't prepared. They didn't have yet another fucking backup plan. They'll probably be moving their base of operations to another shady-ass facility now. Shit!"

He punctuates his mini-rant by kicking a dent into the brick of a building as he swings by it. *"Alright, so you're upset, it's fine! At least we know it's Quackity that's behind it-Charlie and Fundy, too, presumably, that's an advantage,"* Tubbo mutters.

Letting out a sardonic laugh, Tommy swings down into his usual alleyway. "Yeah, just fuckin' great, innit? The guy in charge of our education is a supervillain! That's so advantageous, how didn't I think of it that way?!" he hisses, and as Tubbo goes to protest, Tommy cuts him off. "I don't want to talk about this, Tubbo. I'm going home."

Tubbo's feed cuts out as soon as Tommy yanks his mask off. He goes to move the dumpster-he'd started to hide his bag behind it after it had almost been stolen while he'd been on patrol a few weeks ago-and he sighs. It's not that Tommy's angry with Tubbo, even after that stupid prank, which was, admittedly, hilarious, but he seriously doesn't want to take out his frustrations on his best friend, not when things are still tentative. Tommy can tell Tubbo hasn't entirely forgiven him yet, which is perfectly understandable.

He just doesn't want to make things worse.

He's got a habit of doing that, after all.

Tommy closes the door behind him and is immediately met with frustrated shouts coming from the living room.

Oh, Christ, there's another one of that Schlatt guy's speeches or some shit playing on the news. That's never good. "This guy's full of it! He's got no idea what he's talkin' about!" Techno says, louder

than Tommy's used to hearing from him, and Wilbur just shrugs helplessly as Phil shakes his head.

"He's unbelievable," Phil agrees. "The kid's not doing anything wrong-I mean, sure, he's breaking some laws here and there, but the priority should be keeping him safe and making sure he's got the proper help for dealing with the shit those fuckers put him through."

Wilbur snorts. "Please don't tell me you're dad-ing a vigilante now," he says, and Phil elbows his side. Wilbur looks up at Tommy, who gives the three of them a hesitant wave. He's glad that Wilbur's at least had the sense to keep the criticism to himself, but he'd rather not take any chances. "Toms, you wanna sit with us? We're watching the debate for the emergency election."

"He can't even vote yet," Techno says, and Tommy makes a face at him. "Anyways, Tommy shouldn't be concernin' himself with this. Don't stress the kid out."

"I'm not *trying* to stress him out, I was only asking him if he wanted-ugh, nevermind," Wilbur says, already exasperated, and Tommy closes his eyes in frustration. They're gonna start fighting, he can sense it. Literally. The Sense is waiting for it to start. To his surprise, though, Wilbur just sighs. "You can do whatever you'd like, Tommy."

Shrugging, Tommy sits in the open spot on Phil's other side. "I'll watch," he says easily, and Phil ruffles his hair. It's annoying. Tommy smiles. "Fuck off, old man."

Phil gestures to the screen. The adverts are finished. "Quit calling me old and watch the debate, will you?" he huffs.

Tommy turns his attention to the screen, making a face as soon as Schlatt appears. "*Welcome back,*" the moderator says. "*Our next topic is on the subject of policing. How will you each effectively cut down on the crime rate? You have a minute and thirty seconds to answer, Mr. Schlatt. Then we will hear the rebuttal.*"

Straightening his tie, Schlatt smiles easily-it's a malicious smile, Tommy knows it is-and he grips his podium. "*My policing policies are simple. Crack down on crime by delegating more funds to our*

men in uniform. And, of course, we'll cut off crime at its source. I will singlehandedly ensure that public schools receive more funding and take preventative measures to keep their students from turning down the wrong path," he says, and the latter half of that doesn't sound so bad. Tommy shudders to think of *more* officers in his way, however. *"Of course, we'll have to put protocols in place to... handle... the vigilante situation more effectively."*

The other candidate scoffs, and Schlatt looks rather amused as he gestures for them to speak their mind. *"Oh, please, the only measures you want to take would ensure that London's local hero is too intimidated to continue the good work he's been doing,"* they say firmly, and Tommy is utterly shocked to see someone in a position of any kind of power defending him. *"We are all well aware that Spider-Man is currently operating outside of the law, but we should be working with him, not against him!"*

"I would have to disagree," Schlatt says, eyes narrowed. *"Spider-Man continues to refuse police assistance. As a matter of fact, the private investigation my campaign has been leading revealed that at the time of our late mayor's speech, Spider-Man was fighting the assassin. So, I would like to raise the question of why Spider-Man wouldn't immediately notify the proper authorities. Is he really that arrogant?"*

The other candidate looks a little taken aback. Tommy resists the urge to bury his head in his hands. *"It wasn't like that,"* Techno grumbles, and he shakes his head dismissively when Phil and Wilbur turn to him inquisitively. *"How's he supposed to take care of the situation and tell the cops it's happenin' at the same time? It's just unfair."*

Phil clicks his tongue. *"Techno's right, Spider-Man's just one kid in a mask, he can't be perfect,"* he says, and Wilbur nods eagerly.

"Yeah! I was reading this article the other day-after Techno and Tubbo pointed out how flawed my thinking was, I've been trying to do better research-and as it turns out, Spider-Man has stopped more active crime than half of the precincts in London combined in the past month," Wilbur says, and Tommy has never been more happy to hear Wilbur pretentiously spew statistics. *"And in any case,*

Schlatt might be funding an investigation, but what's it proved? Spider-Man made a tough call and did the best he could in a difficult situation?"

"Wow, you've had a really quick turn-around," Techno muses, and Wilbur grins at him.

"Thank you, I pride myself on being a wishy-washy piece of shit," Wilbur says, and Tommy chuckles. Wilbur reaches over to give Tommy's knee a pat. "Anyways, I know you don't care much about Spider-Man, so I won't say much more, *but* I do think he's a pretty decent role model."

Phil nods. "Oh, for sure. Kid's got guts, his parents must be proud," he says, and Tommy's stomach does a weird little flip-flop at that.

Techno nudges his knuckles into the top of Tommy's head. "Tommy doesn't need a role model, he's doin' just fine," he says, and Tommy flips him off. "Besides, even *if* Tommy had a role model, it'd obviously be me."

"Uh, no, it'd be me," Wilbur protests.

"You're both wrong," Phil says easily, "it'd be Kristin."

Techno and Wilbur blink at Phil, who just shrugs. Tommy nods. "Yeah," he says, "it'd be Kristin."

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! We're not even into the thick of it yet, fair warning, so brace yourselves for some *seriously* intense battles coming up.

head boy

Chapter 33: head boy

Tommy gets an offer from Quackity and faces off with 404 again.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Tommy is cut off mid-sentence by a hand slamming down on the table between his and Ranboo's lunches.

"Ugh, who's still letting *Purpled* sit here?" Tubbo says, eyes narrowed, and Tommy smacks his chest lightly. He's never understood what the beef between the two of them is about, and as if Tubbo can sense his train of thought, he stands abruptly and leans menacingly over the table. "He knows what he did."

Purpled just gives him a flat look. "I don't actually, and I don't give enough of a shit about any of your opinions to know," he says, and Tommy has to give it to the guy—at least he's honest. Purpled shifts his posture just slightly. He's clearly uncomfortable. "Anyway, you guys are, like, the only people I know here or whatever, so you should come to my brother's party. It's on Saturday."

"You have a brother?" Ranboo asks, bewildered, but Tommy's not surprised. Purpled's an enigma, they all know this by now. Ranboo waves his hands, like he's dismissing the question he'd just asked. "Doesn't matter. Why would you invite *us* to a party?"

Shrugging, Purpled frowns slightly. "You're dorks. You probably won't even drink, which is why Punz is letting me invite you in the first place," he says. Tommy's a little offended; he fights supervillains on the daily, and Purpled doesn't think he's hardcore enough to do some casual underage drinking? Purpled blows a hair

away from his face. "The three of you are nerds. And I don't want to sit in my room all night while a bunch of college kids wreck my house."

Tubbo sputters. "What makes you think we'd even *want* to?!" Tubbo demands, only to be completely ignored by Purpled. He shakes his head and makes a face. "This is such bullshit, there's no way we'd go to-"

"I'm down," Tommy says, and Tubbo gives him a glare. Purpled looks vaguely impressed, which is the most emotion Tommy has ever seen out of him. At Ranboo's skeptical brow raise, Tommy just shrugs. "I could go for a bit of a *soirée*."

Purpled snaps his fingers and nods. "You ruined it," he says, and Tommy squawks indignantly. Purpled gives the three of them a short wave and heads off towards the other end of the table. "See you next Saturday, nerds."

Ranboo sighs. "Right, well, that was weird," he says, and Tubbo hums uneasily, still glaring at Purpled's retreating back. Tommy whacks him upside the head, because seriously, there can't have been anything so bad for Tubbo to keep a grudge for *this* long. Ranboo nudges Tommy's arm. "What's with the unexpected use of the French language and your horrific mispronunciation of it?"

Tommy makes a face at him. "I didn't 'horribly mispronounce' it, boob boy, my French is just fine," he says, and Ranboo puts his hands up placatingly. "And it's because Wilbur's been practicing a bunch of French poetry to sound romantic or whatever when he apologizes to Sally for being a prick."

Nodding sagely, Tubbo hums. "Yeah, Wilbur's a prick," he says, and Tommy snorts, ready to dig back into his sandwich. But the PA dings, and it startles him so badly he drops his sandwich on the table. Tubbo wrinkles his nose. "Ew, can't eat that now, it's been on a filthy *cafeteria* table. It's unsanitary."

"Agreed," Ranboo says, handing Tommy a pack of crisps to make up for it. "Here-"

"Tommy Watson to the headmaster's office, please!" Fran's chipper voice says over the intercom, and Tommy resists the urge to slam his head into his dirty-table-sandwich. He's managed to avoid Quackity, Charlie, *and* Fundy all damn day, and now he's being forced into the same room as at least one of them. *"Tommy Watson to the headmaster's office!"*

Tommy stands and sighs. "Well, fellas, I'm off to my doom," he says, and Tubbo gives him a salute and a *highly* worried look. Tommy will be fine, though, it's not as if Quackity knows he's Spider-Man. "See you."

He turns tail and heads for the hallway, trying to ignore the creeping sense of dread that The Sense is giving him. Quackity's been *really* good to the school, there's no reason to be nervous when he's acting as headmaster rather than a murderous supervillain. Tommy shudders as he passes a classroom; at least there's no chance of Quackity brawling with him in a school. As he approaches the front office, Tommy takes a few deep breaths. There's nothing to be nervous about, really, it's-

"Oh! Hello, Tommy from the Watson household!" Charlie's voice says behind him, and Tommy practically jumps a foot in the air. God, looking Charlie in the eye is so much more different now that Tommy knows he part-times as a twelve-foot-tall slime monster. And, oh joy, *he* has a weird suffix now as well. Charlie tilts his head curiously. "You're here to see Quackity from the front office, aren't you?"

Tommy nods and grins nervously. "Yep! So, uh, if you'll excuse me," he says, voice cracking horribly, and Charlie beams at him. Tommy strictly instructs his brain *not* to envision all of the teeth that he normally sees when Slime smiles menacingly down at him, and he hurries into the office, rushing past Fran's desk with a hurried wave and knocking twice on Quackity's door before entering. "You, uh... wanted to see me, sir?"

Looking up from the papers on his desk, Quackity huffs out a laugh. His arm is in a sling. "What're you calling me 'sir' for, kid? Take a seat, you're not in trouble," he says easily, and Tommy breathes out a relieved sigh. Quackity looks amused. The Sense is still not

happy. Quackity sifts through a couple more papers before humming to himself and setting the stack aside. "Okay, now that that's out of the way, let's chat."

"Yeah, man, I love me some good ol' chats," Tommy says, and he's definitely coming across as nervous. He can see it on Quackity's face, the same face that Boss has, the same face that's sneered at him before electrocuting him- "Right! What's all this about, then?"

It'll be good if Tommy doesn't stay in his own head about things. He'll just keep the conversation rolling, and then he doesn't have to think about that stupid fucking gauntlet. Quackity leans back in his chair. He clearly suspects nothing. "As you know, our previous head boy was expelled," he says, and Tommy nods.

"Yeah, he was helping the old headmaster with the whole drug smuggling thing," Tommy says, brows furrowed, and *Christ*, now their school has had *two* corrupt headteachers, "but what does that have to do with me?"

Positively beaming, Quackity sets his hands on his desk in front of him. Well, as best as he can, considering the sling. Tommy tries very hard not to think about the gauntlet he's so used to seeing on Quackity's left hand. "Seeing as your grades are some of the highest in your year, and your attendance is perfect-other than you getting picked up early every Wednesday, which, again, doesn't detract from your record-I would like to offer *you* the position of head boy," he says, and Tommy's face goes slack with shock. Quackity nods. "You're an exemplary student, almost every member of our faculty adores you, and you've clearly been working hard to maintain the same high grades this year that you've had *every* year."

Tommy laughs nervously. "O-Oh, I couldn't possibly-I mean, there's gotta be a mistake here, I'm not... I am *definitely* not head boy material, Big Q," he says, and Quackity's brows furrow as he crosses his arms. Tommy *really* doesn't want to work closely with Quackity, especially when he's trying to find a way to take the guy's *crime empire* down. "I-I'm loud and rude-very rude, Quackity, I'm so impolite-and there are probably a shitload of students with better grades than me! I'm not-! You should *not* pick me."

"Come on, man! You're a *great* kid, Tommy," Quackity says, and it's so sincere that Tommy has to physically restrain himself from cringing at the sheer irony. Quackity gives Tommy a soft smile, and Tommy would *love* it if the earth could open up and swallow him whole right about now. "I think this would be a really good opportunity for you. It'll look appealing to any universities you're applying to, y'know? Plus, it definitely doesn't hurt that you're responsible and kind, and I just *know* you'd kick ass as head boy. *You* are the kind of person I want our school associated with, Tommy."

"I really don't know," Tommy says, and he fucking *wishes* he were back in a vent with *Bruh Sound Effect #2* blasting all around him. Quackity looks disappointed, which is completely unfair, because he doesn't *get* to be a good headmaster and a good guy when he's been fucking terrorizing Tommy for God knows how long. "I just don't think I'm... who you want as the face of your school, Big Q."

Quackity's expression of disappointment turns to one of relief. "Oh, is that what this is about? If that's what bothering you, Tommy, you should know... everybody thinks you're great," he says, and while Tommy would normally bask in compliments about his amazingness, it's hard to appreciate them when they come from a guy who'd tried to electrocute him in a secret underground facility the other day. "You're practically everybody's little brother, man, I'm not-I don't know anyone better suited for the job. You're a *good kid*, Tommy."

Tommy's shoulders hunch up by his ears. "I'm-I don't deserve-I just..." he trails off, unsure of how to properly phrase it so that Quackity will drop it and let him leave. He gets the sinking feeling that Quackity's not going to take no for an answer. Tommy sighs. "I guess I can."

Quackity sticks his right hand out. The Sense screams. "Let's shake on it then," he says, chipper as ever, and Tommy hesitantly shakes his hand. Quackity stands and straightens his suspenders. Tommy hates the stupid things. "Alright, kiddo, head back to class. I'm expecting great things from you, Tom!"

"You got it, Big Q," Tommy says as he walks out.

Well, shit.

"He made you head boy?" Tubbo asks for the fourth time on this patrol-the fifteenth time in total today, counting all the times he'd asked during the duration of the school day. Tommy just groans and continues making a grab for the cat currently stuck in the tree he's climbed. *"And you said yes!? What the fuck, Tommy?! What are you thinking?! He's a criminal!"*

"Yes, well, that does us no good *now*, does it?" Tommy asks, trying to keep his voice as calming and soft as possible as he reaches for the cat again. It bats idly at his hand. "C'mon, Mr. Snuffles, your mum's *really* worried! Let's get you down, yeah?"

Mr. Snuffles meows at him. Rude.

Tubbo scoffs. *"I mean, I know we can't exactly go report him without hard evidence, which would reveal your identity, but still, the least we can do is have as little contact with him as possible!"* he says, and Tommy resists the urge to roll his eyes. Yeah, he *knows* that, but it's not like he can do anything about it now.

Tommy manages to reach up enough to softly brush his fingers against the top of Mr. Snuffles's head. "Yeah, that's it, buddy, come down here," he says gently, and Mr. Snuffles starts to purr, rubbing his cheek against Tommy's knuckles. "No, no, I'm not here to *pet* you, I'm here to get you back to your mum, Mr. Snuffles."

Mr. Snuffles meows at him again. Bastard. *"I'm still looking into where they're moving their base of operations,"* Tubbo says, and Tommy nods, still trying to corral Mr. Snuffles into his arms. *"There's pretty much nothing, but I'm sure it'll be an easy trace once I get past their initial level of security. Our usual suspects never guard things nearly as well as they guard that one project."*

"Guided Evolution," Tommy mutters, and he *finally* gets his hand under Mr. Snuffles's tiny, fluffy stomach. "Aha! Gotcha, you cute little bitch."

He climbs back down, Mr. Snuffles tucked safely under his arm, and he hands the cat back to the very relieved woman on the ground. "Oh, *thank you*, Spider-Man," she says. She smiles at him, and he gives her a firm nod.

"No problem, miss," he says, and Tubbo snorts. Tommy starts to turn away, but the woman stops him, reaching into her purse and handing him a little parcel. "Oh, uh, you don't have to—"

"Please, it's the least I can do. I hope you like crumpets," she says, and Tommy tucks the parcel into his hoodie pocket. She shifts Mr. Snuffles to one arm and uses her free hand to put a hand on his arm. "Thank you for all your hard work. You get too much criticism, dear."

Well, that's awfully nice of her. She turns and walks away, though, and Tubbo's already back to typing frantically. "*There's a bank robbery on fourth*," he says, and Tommy starts to swing in that direction. "*Oh, fuck, we haven't seen 404 in a while. Good thing you've got the gas mask now. I can't find anything that says he's changed his spore formula.*"

Tommy makes a face. "Yeah, just wonderful, I'm only dealing with more gaseous spores, glad there's nothing *new* to deal with," he says, landing atop the bank and fastening the gas mask firmly around his mouth. "Right, should I go in through the front door or through another fuckin' vent?"

"*What do you suddenly have against vents?*" Tubbo asks, and Tommy groans. "*Right, well, you should be fine if you take the side entrance. As far as I can tell, there's no backup plan in place, no drones or bombs or anything that would cause you or anyone else inside any bodily harm.*"

Well, that's good. At least no one's going to die this time. Tommy hops down from the roof and slips through the side door. No cops have seen him, which means he won't have to argue why he shouldn't let 404 continue his antics just so that they can have an ego boost by 'maintaining control' over the fucking parking lot. That's one of the most annoying parts of taking care of these situations.

Tommy slips into the main room, where the bank tellers, patrons, and security guards are passed out. He steps over a big, burly dude and looks around. There's no sign of 404 in the lobby, so he's probably getting something out of the vault. Tommy creeps towards the vault doors, which have already been smashed open. His guess is that 404 had used his spore gun as a battering ram. Weird that he hadn't planned ahead and just... gotten the passcode from the system, but Tommy's not complaining.

He hops up to the ceiling and peers into the vault room. Sure enough, there's 404, digging through locker after locker. "Can't imagine you'll find anything valuable in there, shroom boy, it's all bonds and stocks, super boring stuff," Tommy says, flipping down from the ceiling, and 404 whirls around. He looks different; his previous hoodie, sunglasses, and mask are gone, replaced by an intricate-looking monarch outfit with a really ornate gas mask. The sunglasses are the same, which makes Tommy raise his brows. He'd have picked those as the first to go, they look lame as shit. "Wow, really running with the fungus theme, aren't you?"

And it's true, 404's weird outfit can be easily described as an attempt to look like the king of mushrooms. It's a little ridiculous. "You're one to talk," 404 scoffs, "what species are you even trying to emulate?! You look like a candy cane!"

"At least I don't look like a Tumblr girl's cottagecore fever dream," Tommy says, but he holds up a finger. "No, wait, I shouldn't use that as an insult. Teenage girls get enough shit for their interests without me using them to insult supervillains."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" 404 says, bewildered, and Tommy crosses his arms, nodding wisely.

"It's important we unlearn our biases," he says, and then he grins. "Or have you forgotten that in your time at Peach's castle?"

404 looks unamused. "You're seriously trying to insult me by comparing me to Toad from Mario?" he asks, and Tommy nods. He'd thought that was a rather scathing remark, thank you very much. 404 just scoffs again and grabs his spore gun. "Just shut up and go to sleep!"

A blast of spores hits Tommy, but thankfully, all he breathes is fresh air. “Unfortunately for *you*, I came prepared,” he says, pointing to his gas mask, and 404’s posture shifts to defensive. Good, Tommy can stay on the offensive for once. “Let’s get this over with. You’re more like a mushroom than you think, y’know? You’re full of *shit!*”

“That’s not how mushrooms work, you idiot!” 404 yells, blocking Tommy’s incoming punch with his gun, which *hurts*, but at least it doesn’t break any of Tommy’s fingers. “Fungi break down *dead organisms*, which is the category *you’re* about to fall into!”

“I don’t think so, bitch boy! You can’t put me to sleep, and you *certainly* can’t overpower me,” he says, still grinning because he’s gaining ground on 404 with every punch he throws. Tommy’s fucking *killing it* in this fight, and honestly? He could use a win. He sweeps a leg out to knock 404’s feet out from under him, and 404 lands *hard* on his back. He panics and fires another blast of spores in Tommy’s face, but it does nothing. Tommy grabs him by the front of his fancy cape. “You’re going to tell me who you work for and what you’re taking from the vault.”

“I don’t think I will, actually,” 404 grits out, clawing at Tommy’s arm, but there’s no fighting his superstrength *and* his grip. 404’s eyes narrow; Tommy’s close enough that he can see them through the lenses. “You are gonna *pay*, shithead. You better let me do this!”

Tommy huffs. “Why the *fuck* would I let you steal something of value from a bank vault?” he asks, and 404 struggles more in his grasp. “You are *really* bad at fighting, man, why do they keep letting you do their dirty work?”

“Oh, *fuck you*,” 404 snarls, and The Sense barely has time to warn Tommy before he reaches for his hip and fires two shots into Tommy’s left arm, forcing him to drop 404. He scrambles up from the ground and fires another blast of spores as Tommy cries out in pain.

“You fucking-! This is the *third* time I’ve been shot in this shoulder! Are you fucking *kidding me?!*” Tommy demands, grabbing the spore gun and denting the barrel with his right hand before wrenching it to the side and tackling 404. “Fuck you, you motherfucking

mushroom-"

"Go fuck yourself, you shitty spider-

"I'm *this close* to breaking my no kill policy, piece of *shit-*"

"I will *kill you*, you stupid fucking-

"Can't kill me if you're too busy snorting shrooms, you-AH!"

404 fires another shot into Tommy's leg, and Tommy stumbles back, whimpering. It's definitely not his finest moment. "I'll be taking *this*," 404 pants, standing and taking a vial that had fallen down in the commotion before stepping over Tommy to leave the vault. "Oh, and Spider-Man? You should hope that-

Tommy cuts him off by firing a web at his mouth, then at the vial, and he tugs it so that it launches out of 404's hand and shatters on the ground. 404 freezes for a moment, then hightails it out of the bank. That's just fucking great. "*Tommy, what the fuck?!*" Tubbo demands, and Tommy just groans, right hand still clutching his thigh and left hand uselessly dangling by his side. "*Get the fuck home! Can you even get home?! Oh my God! You need a hospital! I'm calling an ambulance-*"

"I'll be fine, don't call anyone," Tommy grunts out, struggling to stand. He limps his way out of the vault, sighing in relief when he sees people in the lobby starting to wake up. He's trailing blood everywhere, though. He's making a rather big mess, he'd hate to inconvenience the janitors. "I'm on my way out, Hive, I can still swing home."

He's not *great* at web-slinging with one arm completely out of commission, but he's done it before. Then again, he's never had to do it while also having been shot in the leg, but there's a first time for everything, right? Tommy waves off the officers that are currently trying to scold him for letting 404 get away when they had, in fact, done nothing to stop him from leaving, and he fires a web off at the nearest skyscraper, tugging himself upwards with his right arm.

"*I'm patching Techno in*," Tubbo says, rather worried, and Tommy

really hopes he's not currently dripping blood on some poor pedestrian's head at the moment. And *oh*, shit, what Tubbo had said has only *just* registers, but Tommy can't even protest before there's the telltale *click* of Techno picking up the phone. *"Hello, Techno, Tommy's gotten shot in three separate places, can you please pick him up at the alley I'm sending you the directions to now? He thinks he can swing home like normal, but the blood smeared on his gloves is clearly making it difficult for him to maintain a decent hold on his webs."*

"What? No, it's not-oh, *shit*, you're right! Dropping down now," Tommy says, and he manages to land on his good leg in the alley that Tubbo had somehow predicted he'd end up in. Tubbo really knows him well. "Anyways, how are *you*?"

"You were shot three times?! What the hell?!" Techno hisses, clearly already on his way to get in his fancy, expensive car. Tommy just slumps against the nearest wall and takes a few deep breaths. He's lost quite a lot of blood, but it shouldn't be a problem so long as he takes care of it within a few hours. *"Alright, I'm not too far, how are his vitals lookin', Tubbo?"*

Tubbo sighs. He sounds worried. *"He'll be fine, he's not lost enough blood for me to be panicking, but we're still in the danger zone,"* he says, and Techno hums. Tommy waves at a rat on the other end of the alleyway. It skitters behind a dumpster. *"Tommy, how much pain are you in right now?"*

Tommy frowns thoughtfully. "I think adrenaline's taking over, I can't feel much," he says, sounding dazed even to himself, and Techno sucks in a breath through his teeth. Tommy flicks a pebble across the alley. "How's your day been, Tech?"

"It was great until I heard my kid brother got shot," Techno mutters. Then he groans. *"And I'm not sayin' it's your fault, you're dealin' with lunatics here. I'm pullin' up now, nobody's around, I'll come get you and put you in the car."*

Tommy nods, and he blinks up at the sky. There are very few clouds around today. "Oh, hello, Techno," he says as Techno's long pink hair comes into view. It's braided! That means Phil and Kristin might

both be working from home today. "That's lovely."

"What's lovely?" Techno asks, and he looks all worried as he tucks one arm under Tommy's knees and wraps the other underneath his shoulders. Oh, when had Tommy sat on the ground? He doesn't remember doing that. "Tommy? What's lovely?"

"Mum and Dad must be home, your hair's in a braid," he murmurs, slumping against Techno's chest as he stands. He feels a little loopy. Techno tucks him into the passenger seat, and Tommy frowns. "Aw, no, I'm gonna get blood all over your nice car... sorry, Spud..."

Techno buckles him in and then hops into the driver's seat, reaching across Tommy to pull the passenger door shut. He starts to speed off towards the house. "Yeah, I couldn't care less about my car, kid, not when you're bleedin' out," he says, and he sounds so worried. Tommy feels incredibly bad for making his brother so concerned. Techno rolls his eyes as a call comes in, but he accepts it. "Hey, Tubbo, I've got Tommy and we're headed back to the house. He's definitely out of it, but I think I can get him in the house without anyone seeing."

"Okay, good to know. I've erased the security footage, you definitely weren't seen. I'll meet you guys there," Tubbo says, and Tommy closes his eyes. He could definitely use a little nap.

When he opens them again, he's in bed.

Now, how did *that* happen?

"Oh, hello," he mumbles, rubbing his eyes and wincing as he sits up. His left arm is completely bandaged, as is his thigh, which is nice. Tubbo whips around from his place at Tommy's desk, and Techno stirs at the foot of the bed, where he's leaning his head on his arms. "Is... is he asleep?"

"Yeah, we've been waiting for you to wake up for four hours," Tubbo says, sounding quite tired himself, and Tommy's brows furrow. Techno stirs some more, and he slowly sits up. Tubbo rolls the chair over to nudge Tommy's uninjured shoulder. "You feelin' alright,

bossman?"

Tommy nods, and Techno lumbers over. "I'm gonna change your bandages," he says, and Tommy just shrugs. Or, well, half-shrugs; he doesn't want to strain his left shoulder too much, considering this is the third time it's been shot. Techno nods at Tubbo. "Go ahead and tell him your idea."

Tilting his head inquisitively, Tommy turns his attention to Tubbo. "Right, so, I was thinking that since you're kinda... in hot water when it comes to politics right now, and we *definitely* don't want a guy that hates your guts in power..." he starts, and Tommy has to agree. Having Schlatt as mayor would mean a whole lotta regulations to dance around. "I think it'd help our chances if we had, like, a PR event for you."

"Huh? Fuck are you on about?" Tommy asks as Techno rewraps his bicep. Tubbo shoves his phone into Tommy's hands, and Tommy squints at it. "Tubbo, why the hell am I looking at your stan account?"

"It's not a stan account... anymore," he mutters, and Techno snorts. Tommy graciously ignores how red Tubbo's face is as he continues. "*Anyways*, it's not my account I want you to look at, it's the fact I've got over two hundred *thousand* followers now. If I tweet out that I've managed to secure Spider-Man for a Q-and-A in London, we're *bound* to get traction, and then you can show that not only are you super friendly with the *actual* citizens of London, but that you're legitimately focused on helping people out!"

Techno hums thoughtfully as he switches out the bandages on Tommy's leg. "I could probably convince my Greek professor to lend you guys a lecture hall. He's a huge fan of Spider-Man," he says, and Tubbo perks up, clapping his hands together. Tommy gives him a curious look, and Techno shrugs. "I'm tired of the only headlines being 'Spider-Man: Hero or Menace?' so..."

"Well, technically they're not wrong, Tommy *is* a menace," Tubbo says, and Tommy scoffs in disbelief.

"I am *injured*," he says, and Tubbo gives him a flat look. "You are

making fun of an injured man, Tubbo. How *dare* you.”

Techno glares at him, and Tommy settles back against the pillows. “You’ll probably be fine soon, your regeneration made you pass out to heal you more effectively,” he mutters. “Still, you shouldn’t be on patrol for the next couple of days. Otherwise you could permanently damage the muscle fibers in your arm if you get injured there again.”

“Yeah, man, what’s with you and getting shot in the shoulder?” Tubbo asks, and Tommy just shakes his head. He’s got no clue, honestly. Tubbo waves a hand dismissively. “Anyway, we’ll do the Q-and-A in a few days. Make sure you keep your brain-to-mouth filter up, got it?”

Tommy puts his hands in the air placatingly. “I have never said *anything* without thinking first, Tubbo,” he says, and both Techno and Tubbo give him a flat look. Tommy sighs. “Alright, fine, I’ll be careful.”

“Good,” Techno says, “I don’t want my Greek professor to get mad and tell me any ridiculously offensive phrases are basic conversation starters... again.”

“What the hell even goes *on* in your Greek class?” Tommy asks, and Techno shakes his head.

“You do *not* wanna know.”

And the web entangles further...

Tommy's really struggling here, poor kid :(At least the PR event might help! Right?... Right?

automata

Chapter 34: automata

The PR event does not go according to plan.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Tommy's hands are a little shaky.

But it's not because of the normal kind of anxiety he gets, it's a different kind. It's an excited kind of nervousness that buzzes in his bones. As he stands on the little stage in Techno's Greek classroom, Tommy takes a few deep breaths. He's got this; it's no different than talking to reporters or pedestrians on the street. It's just a little forum for people to ask him things, and Tubbo had promised to plant Ranboo in line in order to start him off with a softball question.

This is good, it's gonna be fine. Tommy's gonna be so cool and well-spoken and he's gonna impress everybody. The public will love him so much there'll be parades in his honor, Schlatt will get kicked out of the mayoral race, and everyone will gleefully cheer his name in the streets.

Alright, maybe that's wishful thinking, but Tommy's still gonna crush this.

Tubbo comes in, and he looks like a total dork with his headset and clipboard. The brief moment that passes between him opening the door and closing it behind them is filled with cheers and excited chatter. "Right, are you ready to do this?" Tubbo asks, and Tommy nods firmly. He can do this. He's got this. Facing down supervillains-slash-teachers is *far* scarier than answering questions from fans of

his alter ego. Tubbo claps a hand on Tommy's right shoulder. "I'll open up the doors, you get on stage. Techno'll make sure you don't get talked over by keeping track of the mics behind the curtain. It's gonna go fine, you're gonna do great."

"I'm gonna do great," Tommy repeats, and Tubbo gives his shoulder a pat. Tommy takes a few deep breaths and climbs up on the stage, nervously fumbling with the mic. Tubbo starts to turn back towards the doors, but Tommy clears his throat. "Uh, Tubbo? Am I... these are people that *like* me, right? I'm not gonna-there's not gonna be any, like, *bad* questions, right?"

Tubbo raises a brow at him. "You say this as if I haven't vetted every single attendee by stalking their online presences," he says, shaking his head. Tommy blinks at him. "As if I'm completely unprofessional. I'm better than that, Tommy, of *course* I checked."

Tommy puts his hands up placatingly, and Tubbo throws him a cheeky grin before he opens up the doors and starts directing people to *orderly* file in, thanks, no stampedes here, they'll all get their turn with Spider-Man, and blah, blah, blah. Tommy gives the crowd a little wave, and they go fucking *bananas*. There's cheering and only a *little* bit of stampeding before Tubbo gets the crowd back under control.

Once the crowd starts to settle down, Tubbo directs them into a line; to Tommy's surprise, there are still quite a lot of people sitting once the line's only halfway to the back. He supposes some of the crowd are just here to listen to what he has to say, which is absolutely mind-boggling. "We love you, Spider-Man!" someone says towards the back, and Tommy laughs nervously into the mic. People cheer.

Tubbo clears his throat and takes the stage next to Tommy. "Settle down, please! I know we're all *very* excited to see Spider-Man, and he was nice enough to agree to this when I tracked him down on his patrol," he says, and Tommy chuckles, "but let's not scare him off, yeah? Go ahead and ask the first question, man!"

Aha! Ranboo's here. Lovely. He clears his throat and hunches down to reach the mic, which Tommy tries *very* hard not to laugh at. "Right, uh... hi," he says, and Tommy gives him an amused wave.

“What’s, um-what’s your favorite part of being Spider-Man?”

Tommy hums thoughtfully. “I mean, honestly, I’m not really sure. I just really like getting to help people, knowing I’ve made someone’s life a little easier, stuff like that,” he says, and a few people in the crowd ‘aww’ at him. “Thanks for your question, man!”

Ranboo nods awkwardly and goes to sit back down. Tommy feels a little more at ease now; he knows what he’s doing somewhat now, and it shouldn’t be too much of a problem. The next person steps up to the mic. “Um, hi, Spider-Man,” they say, sounding really excited to be here, “I just wanted to know what you plan on doing to protect the city better!”

Tommy blinks, and he chuckles nervously. “I mean, I can’t really do much more other than look into certain crimes-the real confidential ones, y’know? On top of school and homework and all my personal life stuff, I can only patrol for so long. I’m just one person,” he says, and the person at the mic nods, seemingly thoughtful. Tommy shrugs. “I mean, I’d love to do another one of the weekend-long patrols, but I’ve been told that’s not exactly good for my health, mental or otherwise.”

That one earns a few laughs, and Tommy grins. One girl steps up to the mic, presumably a friend at her side, and they giggle to themselves before the one in front clears her throat. “What’s your civilian life like?” she asks, and that’s... a little invasive.

“Can’t *exactly* disclose that one, I don’t want to give any identifying information or anything,” he says, and the girl nods, her friend whispering frantically to her. Tommy thinks for a moment. “I mean, I guess I’m pretty much like anybody else. I’ve got a mum and a dad and some *really* annoying siblings, I go to school, and I like hanging out with my friends. I’m just some guy, really, nothing special.”

The girls sit down, and someone else approaches the mic. “Spider-Man, what’s the toughest part of what you do?” he asks, and he’s, like, Phil’s age. Tommy doesn’t know how to talk to adults, he only knows how to fight them, either physically or verbally.

“Uh, probably being shot at,” he answers honestly, but he laces it

with humor, and while there are some sympathetic noises in the crowd, most people pick up on the fact he's joking around, and there's a few scattered laughs. "For real, though, you'd think with how strict London's firearm laws are, it'd be much rarer."

There's another round of laughter; the audience is quickly warming up to him, and Tommy's having a pretty decent time, all things considered. A few more questions, a few more answers. It's kind of fun! He's getting to talk to the people that support him, and nobody's asking anything too deep or difficult to answer.

After answering a question about where he goes to get food on patrol-he tells them about his favorite food truck, of course, because it's incredible-Tommy glances over at Tubbo, who's gesturing for him to wrap it up. Just as Tommy's about to do so, there's a quiet rumble, and Tommy's hands start to tremble.

Tubbo smiles and steps up to the stage. "Uh, alright, I think we're going to wrap things up here, Spider-Man's a very busy guy, after all," he says, and Tommy blinks, raising his hand to wave goodbye. "Thank you all for comi-"

There's a crash from behind him, and Tommy coughs as dust and debris spews across the stage. He pushes Tubbo away, because this can't *possibly* be good. "Leaving so soon? I didn't even get to ask *my* question yet," someone says, though the voice sounds like it's coming through an old-fashioned radio. Tommy waves away the dust, and his eyes widen at the sight before him.

Everything about the guy is *shifting*. His coat, long and green and reminiscent of shitty steampunk video games that Tommy had tried out and dropped within a couple hours, has moving metal parts to it, gears and panels that click and adjust and move together and pull apart. His arms are outstretched, and the tips of his gloved fingers are coated in bronze pieces that seem to move with a mind of their own.

Not to mention his face.

Or, well, the screen in place of it.

Tommy's pretty sure his actual head is somewhere within the boxy-ass television, but all that shows is a smiley face. It's rather horrifying. "I'm sorry, I don't believe we've met," he manages, and the guy tilts his head. Jesus Christ, that fucking smiley face is intimidating. There's panicked screaming in the audience, and Tommy *really* hopes this guy doesn't go for them.

"I had hoped my colleagues would have... taken care of things by now, but it seems I'll have to handle you myself. I am Automata," he says, and he raises one hand with a flourish. Tommy jumps into a defensive stance, ready to block any incoming attacks or hits, but The Sense warns him to turn around. He does, just in time to watch a bunch of desks and chairs yank into the air and twist into metal sheets that pin him to the ground and firmly bolt themselves down. The guy, Automata, chuckles sardonically. "Well, that didn't take much."

"Screw you," Tommy grits out, wrenching a hand out from the metal and firing a web off at Automata, who blocks it with a floating desk. More metal flies to weigh Tommy's wrists and ankles down, and he searches the crowd for Tubbo and Ranboo, who are nowhere to be seen. The metal shifts and groans, and he's quickly pinned-like a crucifixion, that's horrifying-to an upright amalgamation of different sheets of metal. "Everyone get out of here!"

As the crowd turns to run for the doors, they slam shut with the snap of Automata's fingers. "I think you're gonna want to stick around for this," he says, voice dark, and Tommy struggles against the metal. Automata grabs his head and wrenches it upwards; the little bronze pieces dig into Tommy's scalp. He points at someone else with his other hand and proceeds to pile more metal on Tommy's binds. "You! Start filming."

Tommy's still struggling, and the person Automata had frightened into filming the interaction lifts their phone up with shaking hands. Tommy's lip curls up into a snarl as he struggles against the metal. "I'm gonna get out of here, and when I do-"

He's abruptly cut off by Automata slamming an oxygen mask over his mouth. A neon green gas starts to filter in, and Tommy holds his breath for as long as he can. Automata's creepy smiley face screen

doesn't waver as Tommy finally has to gasp for air, inhaling a good amount of the unknown gas.

Pure fear strikes him like a lightning bolt.

Tommy starts to shake uncontrollably, chest heaving as he starts to hyperventilate. He's fucking *terrified*, and he can't even bring himself to do anything but cry out in terror as Automata waves away the metal trapping him. Tommy clutches at his head-it's pounding, he can't fucking *think*, he's too *scared*, but of what?!

"*This is your hero?*" Automata asks, sounding rather amused, and his voice feels more echo-y than it had just been. As Tommy continues to wheeze and shake on the ground, Automata's boot comes in contact with his stomach, and Tommy skids across the length of the stage. "A trembling *child* prone to bouts of impulsivity, taken out in less than a minute? Pathetic."

Tommy's vision starts to swim, and the lecture hall abruptly falls out from under him, leaving him in a void of nothing but darkness. Tommy can't even see his hands in front of him. The sudden silence is suffocating, and he watches helplessly as shapes start to form around him. It's horrifying-he's pretty sure he's stuck in his own fucking mind, because all he can hear is his own fucking thoughts, and they're surrounding him.

*Find Tubbo, find Techno, find Ranboo, they're not safe, he's still there, he's going to kill them, you have to find them, keep them safe, it's your fault they're in danger, you have to save them, there's a crowd full of people there, why are you only worried about the people **you** care about, you're so fucking selfish, Tommy, really, what the fuck is wrong with you, you're selfish, **selfish, SELFISH-***

Tommy's chest heaves with the effort to try and calm himself down. Take his thoughts one at a time, calm himself down, this is probably just the effects of whatever the fuck Automata had gassed him with. One at a time, and he can deal with them. Right, so-

Where's Tubbo?

One of the shifting shapes forms his best friend, right in front of him.

The logical part of Tommy's brain tells him that yes, this *is* the gas, this isn't *actually* Tubbo, it can't be. Tubbo hadn't been wearing his favorite green shirt today, he's probably still hiding, and he *definitely* wouldn't look at Tommy the way that *this* Tubbo is looking at him. But the part of Tommy's brain that's been attacked by the gas fills him with nothing but pure fear.

Pseudo-Tubbo tilts his head, face blank and eyes full of malice. "You're a monster, y'know?" he says, voice painfully cheery, though his flat expression doesn't change. Tommy's breathing gets shaky as Pseudo-Tubbo takes a step forward. He struggles to make himself sit upright, and something's *definitely* off. Pseudo-Tubbo is so much taller than him, he practically towers over him. "I'd say getting bit by that spider made you even worse, but you've always been a bit of a shit friend. The lies, the deceit, the endangerment... I don't know why I'm surprised."

"That's... that's not true, you don't think that," Tommy says weakly, crawling back as Pseudo-Tubbo takes more steps forward. The blank expression shifts into a twisted grin, and there's a flash of green in Pseudo-Tubbo's eyes-the same green as the gas, Tommy reminds himself-which isn't right, because Tubbo's eyes are *blue*, they've always been blue.

"Don't I? You never **ask** me how I feel, so how the fuck would **you** know?" Pseudo-Tubbo asks, still sounding horribly cheerful, and Tommy edges back more. Pseudo-Tubbo's teeth look too sharp. "Everything's all about you. Your stupid savior complex, your shitty feelings, your **pathetic, PATHETIC** excuses."

Tommy's bottom lip trembles. "They're not excuses, they're not, I'm trying to keep you safe," he whimpers, and another shape forms in Pseudo-Tubbo's hand. It's 404's spore gun. "Please, please, I'm not- I didn't mean to-"

"When I'm dead," Pseudo-Tubbo says, steamrolling over his words, "will you blame yourself? You should. Knowing you, you'll throw yourself a pity party. Someone's going to find out who I am, and they'll kill me! Won't that be **fun**, Tommy? I'll **die** because of you!"

"You're not gonna die, I-I'm gonna protect you, I swear it," Tommy

says, barely above a whisper, and Pseudo-Tubbo rolls his eyes. A little bit of conviction shines through the sheer terror, and Tommy nods determinedly. "Yeah, I'm gonna protect you. You and everyone else!"

"Everyone? Does that include me?"

Tommy whips his head to the right to see Wilbur standing underneath a tree-the tree in their backyard, the one that had held their tire swing before Foolish had accidentally snapped the rope. His brain swims. *That's Wil, he's safe, he's okay, but he's not here? Is he here? Did he come? Did he show up? Wilbur is safe, go to him, go to him-*

He dives out of Pseudo-Tubbo's way and runs into Wilbur's outstretched arms. "Thank fuck you're here," he whispers, "I'm so scared, Wil..."

Wilbur chuckles. It doesn't sound like his laugh, but Tommy's brain is too relieved at the idea that there's someone safe here, wherever he is, to think too much about it. *"Everything's fine. Why would you be scared?"* Wilbur asks, and Tommy's brow furrows at the weird, static quality to his voice. Something burns into his back, and Tommy jumps away from Wilbur. Everything smells like cigarettes. *"Toms, are you lying to me again?"*

Tommy yells out in alarm. Wilbur's face is obscured by smoke-so much smoke that it fills Tommy's lungs and fucking *squeezes*. He's choking, he's going to choke to death, Wilbur is *suffocating him*. "W-Wil," he chokes out, and that's not Wilbur, and Not-Wilbur lights another cigarette, only to put it out on Tommy's arm and light another to repeat the process. The tree behind him is in flames. "You have to stop-!"

"You could give up being Spider-Man, and things would go back to normal," Not-Wilbur says, and Tommy can barely make out tears streaming down his brother's face. *"Am I a bad big brother, Tommy? Why do you hate me, Tommy? Why do you lie to me, Tommy? Why do you want things to CHANGE, Tommy?!"*

The fear is suffocating him again, and Tommy tries to pull Not-

Wilbur away from the burning tree, the ruins of their childhood memories, only to look down and find that Not-Wilbur is rooted to the spot; the roots of the tree are digging into his legs. He's bleeding.

"You can't help him," Techno's voice says, and there are hands on his shoulders. Nails dig into his skin through his hoodie, through his suit. It's horrible. *"You can't help anybody. You can't even **fight** right. No wonder I didn't bother with knowin' you for so long. You're just not worth it. You're **still** not worth it."*

No, that's not right, Techno would never say that to him. Techno wouldn't, he *wouldn't*. Tommy clamps his hands over his ears and shakes his head. "No, n-no, this isn't real, it's not real," he mumbles, whimpering at the sight of Not-Wilbur going up in flames along with the tree. He can hear Blaze's laugh somewhere. Pseudo-Tubbo sneers down at him, spore smog swirling around him and Techno. "It's not real, it's not real...!"

Phil and Kristin materialize in front of him, and suddenly, Tommy's in his goddamn kitchen. *"I can't believe you're doing this to us,"* Phil says, and Tommy can finally see his hands again. At least it's not pitch black anymore. Pinching the bridge of his nose, Phil shakes his head. *"Do you have any idea what they'll do to us if they find out your identity? What were you **thinking**?"*

*"I'm so disappointed in you. I've tried **everything** to help you, Tommy,"* Kristin says, and Tommy's breath catches in his throat as she smiles at him. It's so sincere, but her words are dripping with disdain. *"Are you doing this on purpose? Have we failed you **that** badly? Do you really hate me **that** much?"*

"N-No, you haven't, I don't, you-!" Tommy cuts himself off with a cry as the kitchen and his parents disappear, and he feels like he's falling. He falls right into the hands of Slime, who wraps his hands around Tommy's body and *squeezes* the air out of his lungs. He cries out in pain as Slime's grip becomes crushing, and his eyes go wide as something else starts to form in front of him. "What do you want from me?!"

Ranboo stares down at him with nothing but contempt. *"The truth,"* he says, and it's so loud that Tommy's head throbs. He struggles

weakly against Slime's grip, and he lets out a shout of terror and frustration as Boss's disembodied gauntlet comes to grab Ranboo by the throat. *"I'm in danger every day. I don't even get the privilege of knowing that."*

"He is," Quackity's voice says from somewhere in the void, and the darkness shifts into a cruel mimicry of Las Nevadas. Sally and Wilbur are huddled in the corner, clutching at each other as Fundy stands over them, staff brandished. *"You didn't even give them the courtesy of a fucking **warning**, Tommy. What happens when I bring my little side business to the school, hm? Will they even get the chance to run, or will you **LIE** to them again?!"*

"I never lied! I never-I didn't-!" Tommy sobs as Slime's-Charlie's-fingers dig into his sides, and he hangs his head, only to have it wrenched up again by Ranboo, whose usual sunglasses have a dot in each lens and whose mask now has the same smile as Automata's screen. "Ranboo, please, I-I didn't mean to!"

*"Am I just supposed to sit there and listen to you whine about how **hard** things are for you when all you do is **mock** me?"* Ranboo asks, and Tommy can't stop himself from crying out as the blade on Fundy's staff cuts clean through Wilbur's throat. Sally screams. *"That'll be your fault. Everyone you love, everyone you **care about** will die, and it's all on you. All because you decided to play hero. I don't even trust you anymore."*

The gauntlet tightens around Ranboo's throat, and it crackles with electricity. Tommy struggles against Charlie's grip, only to turn and find that it's Tubbo holding him back. *"Why won't you let me tell him, Tommy?"* Tubbo whispers, and Tommy hangs his head, shoulders shaking with the effort not to cry. Tubbo's arms dig into his stomach. Tommy feels nauseous. *"You dragged me into this, **lied** to me, let me **idolize** you for a boost to your own ego-"*

"That's not true!" Tommy protests, and he's thrown to the ground. He struggles to sit up, and Ranboo and Tubbo both tower over him, Automata holding them each by their throats. Tommy's arms shake as he pushes himself up to stand. "Let them go!"

Automata's laughter echoes around him. *"What exactly can **you** do*

about it?" Ranboo hisses, and Tommy raises his fists up by his chest. Automata shoves Ranboo forward wordlessly, a hand still on his neck. The void shifts to the lecture hall, but it looks the same as it had when they'd first gotten there. This still isn't reality. Ranboo tilts his head. *"He's got you **beat**, Tommy. He's going to kill us, and it's going to be **all your fault**."*

*"**All your fault!**"* Tubbo cheers, and suddenly he's Wilbur, then Techno, then Phil, then Kristin, then Puffy, then Foolish, then Sally, then Tubbo again, and Tommy shakes his head frantically.

"Everyone you love is going to die, and it's all your fault!"

"It's not!" Tommy cries, squeezing his eyes shut. Silence. Finally. He takes a few heaving breaths, hands shaking as he clamps them over his ears. "I don't want to be here! I want to go home! Let me go!"

He stands alone in the void for what feels like days, trying desperately to shut out every sensation he can.

After a while, he opens his eyes, only to see the inky blackness stretching out in front of him endlessly. With no taunting friends or family to be found, Tommy swallows hard and starts to walk forward. It feels like walking through snow.

"Tommy," Techno says softly, and Tommy shakes his head. He's not falling for this again. He's going to ignore whatever the fuck this gas is doing to him until it's out of his system. *"Tommy, buddy, you gotta wake up."*

Slightly shaking still, Tommy wraps his arms around himself. "Tech?" he asks, voice barely above a whisper, too terrified to hope.

"He's not waking up," Tubbo says from somewhere else, somewhere in the void, and Tommy wonders why he sounds worried instead of delighted at that little piece of news.

Maybe the gas had knocked him out. Maybe Techno and Tubbo had somehow gotten him out of there. There's a slight pressure on his shoulder, like somebody's shaking him, and abruptly, Tommy sits up, panting.

He's in a supply closet.

"Thank God," Techno mutters, and Tommy cries out, backing himself into the corner as Techno starts to reach for him. His chest starts to heave again as his breathing quickens, and his eyes dart from Techno to Tubbo, who's kneeling beside him, looking rather shocked at Tommy's reaction. Techno's brows furrow. "Tommy, are you okay?"

"Is this real?" Tommy whispers, shaking, and Techno and Tubbo exchange a wary look before they both nod. Tommy decides that that's not good enough, and he pinches himself *hard*. It hurts. "Ah, fuck, okay, I guess this *is* real. 'Ow do, then, fellas?"

Techno blinks. "Uh. Tubbo just used rubber bullets to chase off a supervillain, and you were screamin' in pain and shakin' on the floor for a while before you passed out, and we had to evacuate the event before carryin' you into the nearest supply closet and takin' your mask off to help you breathe easier, so... not great," Techno answers honestly, and Tommy swallows.

"I-I didn't... say anything, did I?" he asks, because if they know what he'd been apparently hallucinating, that would be *really* embarrassing.

"No, you were mostly just clutching at your head, curled up in a corner," Tubbo says, looking rather concerned. "I mean, you *did* keep apologizing to nobody in particular. Which is weird for you, because you never apologize."

Techno sighs, and he moves to Tommy's side, pulling out his phone and turning on the flashlight, and he uses his other hand to pull Tommy's eyelids open all the way. Tommy swats at him and makes a face as he squirms out of Techno's grasp. "Fuck off, I'm fine!" he says, and Techno makes an uncertain sort of noise.

"That guy was just... watchin' you while you screamed," Techno says, and he clearly suppresses a shudder. Tommy doesn't bother suppressing his own. Automata is terrifying, and he's not even too proud to admit that. Whatever that gas was, it had *seriously* fucked with Tommy's brain. Techno runs a hand through his hair. "Well, I'm

pretty sure you don't have a concussion, and I'm also pretty sure that whatever he gassed you with didn't make you high, so that's good."

Tubbo is oddly quiet. Tommy grabs his mask from the ground and pulls it back over his head. "I should probably see if I can go after him," he says, and Tubbo whips his head up to lock eyes with Tommy at that. It's rather paralyzing. "Uh, or I'll go home...?"

"Damn right you're going home," Tubbo says, quiet but firm, and Tommy swallows nervously. If Pseudo-Tubbo had looked mad, actual Tubbo looks *furios*. "He was going to *take* you, Tommy, I had to-if I hadn't gotten the app for Shroud open in time, o-or if he had been able to *control* Shroud, I-you could've been-!"

He cuts himself off, dragging a hand over his face. Tommy gently grabs Tubbo's wrist, and he squeezes it lightly. "Thanks for saving me, Big T," he says, and Tubbo closes his eyes. "Hey, I'm *okay*, and it's because *you're* so good at planning ahead. You couldn't have known that some freak with a TV head would crash the event, Tubs, none of us could."

"I'm still the one who suggested it," Tubbo says, voice cracking, and Tommy brings him in for a hug. Tubbo clutches at the back of his hoodie and takes a few shaky breaths. "I've never heard you scream like that, Tommy, I thought you were..."

"Gonna take a lot more than a little hallucinogenic gas to kill me," Tommy jokes, and Tubbo abruptly pulls back from their hug. Techno's staring at him. Ah, Tommy recognizes his mistake here. "It wasn't anything *bad*, I'm pretty sure all it did was make me, like, come face to face with my worst fears or whatever, it was fine!"

Tubbo smacks him upside the head. "Are you actually kidding me?! Your *worst fears?!'*" he demands, and Tommy pouts, rubbing his head. Tubbo scrubs his hands over his face again, looking rather exhausted. "That's not *fine*, Tommy, that's *insane*."

Techno puts his hands between the two of them placatingly before Tommy can say anything in protest, and he shakes his head. "Tommy, I get you're tryin' to make us feel better-and not to sound

cheesy here, but-it's okay if you're not okay," he says, and Tommy looks down at his hands. They're still shaking. "And Tubbo, you can be mad at Tommy all you want for repressin' his feelings, but all we can do is make sure he knows it's fine to talk about it *if he wants to*. We can't make him."

"I know that, I just..." Tubbo trails off, sighing. Tommy looks at him, shoulders hunched. "I just want you to be okay, and it's fine if you're not, but... can you at least *tell* me when you're not? I won't press you for answers, but I'm tired of seeing you brush things off when you're clearly not okay. Plus, now you've got *another* villain to deal with, and I-I! I'm *terrified*, Tommy."

Tommy's brows furrow. "What? Tubbo, you know I can handle myself."

"That's not the problem!" Tubbo says, fists clenched. "I *know* you can handle yourself! You shouldn't *have to*! Everyone's *attacking* you, whether it's supervillains or politicians, and I can't do anything about it! Today, the *one* time I thought I could help, I just drew out another danger for you to face! You have us in your corner, but when does that become not enough? When does everything else get to be too much?"

Hesitantly, Tommy reaches out for Tubbo's hands. He wonders if what he'll say will make it worse, if Tubbo will just continue to blame himself, but... it can't hurt to try. He gently pries Tubbo's fingers from where they're digging into his palms and takes hold of his hands, taking a moment to collect his thoughts. "Nothing's too much for us, Tubbo. It's me and you against the world, remember? Best friends 'til the end," he says, and Tubbo smiles softly.

"Me and you against the world," Tubbo repeats, and Tommy gives his hands a brief squeeze.

"What am I, dead meat?" Techno asks, and Tommy bursts out laughing.

His little spider squad isn't too shabby, even if they're facing down a new threat.

Even if The Sense is warning him that Automata is going to be worse than the rest of them.

As long as he has Techno and Tubbo, Tommy can get through it.

We're finally getting into the good stuff! And by good stuff, I mean get ready for some serious angst.

healing

Chapter 35: healing

Tommy takes some time to process and relax.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

It's raining.

That means Tommy's not allowed to patrol today.

Tubbo had made that a rule after Tommy had gotten a bit of a cold a week or so ago after fighting Vos in the rain. So here he is in his room with Tubbo, getting ready to head over to bother Ranboo at Puffy's fabric shop. Since the whole slightly-cold-blooded discovery, Tommy's made sure to bundle up a bit better. He's zipping up his jacket when Techno bursts into the room, phone in hand.

"Why is everyone on Twitter calling you their 'little meow meow?'" he asks, and Tubbo practically folds in half cackling, and Tommy snatches the phone from Techno's hand, scrolling through the trending tab. *Spider-Man* and *my little meow meow* are first and second on the trending tab respectively, and Tommy immediately taps on the latter to read through it. Techno nudges Tubbo. "Is being a 'meow meow' a good thing?"

Tommy groans as he scrolls through the tweets. They're mostly clips from the event, accompanied by copious amounts of emojis and keyboard smashes, and a ton of them have serious, positive, and genuine tone tags attached. There are also rather scathing quote retweets in reply to headlines from news outlets that are blaming Tommy for what went down. People are legitimately upset over what had happened to him, which would normally be really nice, but

Tommy isn't sure if it's worth being referred to as... that... by a bunch of accounts with Spider-Man profile pictures.

At least it's something positive.

Eh, he'll take what he can get.

He just shakes his head and hands Techno's phone back. Tubbo elbows him. "C'mon then, little meow meow, let's go visit Ranboo," he says, and Tommy shoves him out the door. They head downstairs, and Tubbo peers into the kitchen, tugging on Tommy's arm until he joins him. Tommy tries not to flinch when he does. "Is he... okay?"

Wilbur's currently pacing in the kitchen, mumbling something to himself. It sounds like his usual French poetry bullshit, which means he *still* hasn't made up with Sally yet. Tommy rolls his eyes and slings his arm around Tubbo's shoulders. "Tubbo, my friend, this is why you should never piss off a woman," he says, and Wilbur whips his head up to glare at him.

The doorbell rings, and Tommy's brow furrows. He doesn't think they're expecting anyone over today. He heads over to the front door, Tubbo trailing behind him, and he blinks in surprise when he's met face-to-face with Sally as he opens it. "Oh! Hello, Tommy," she says, shoulders hunched as she clings to her umbrella like a lifeline. Christ, it's really coming down out there. "Is Wil-is your brother home?"

Tommy blinks at her. "One moment, please," he says, and he promptly shuts the door before he turns tail and runs to the kitchen. He grabs Wilbur by the shoulders. "Sally is at the door."

Wilbur's face fills with dread. "No," he whispers, aghast, and Tubbo looks between the two of them, seemingly amused. Wilbur shakes his head frantically and runs a hand through his hair, which Tommy should probably tell him not to do in front of Sally, considering his hairline. "I can't talk to Sally yet, I-I don't even know what to say!"

"Well, you better say *something*, because she's out there *right fucking now*," Tommy says in a half-whisper, half-shout, and Wilbur

makes a distressed sort of noise at the back of his throat. If Wilbur doesn't get over himself and get to the door, Sally's probably just going to leave. Tommy pokes Wilbur in the chest. "You are shit with women, Big Dubs. But you don't have to be! Go and talk to her, for fuck's sakes! Trust me, I know what I'm talking about here, women *love* me."

Tubbo moves over to the kitchen window, peeking through the blinds. Wilbur's still psyching himself up, and Tommy's rubbing his shoulders like a boxing coach. "Uh, guys...?" Tubbo says, and Wilbur hums in acknowledgement. "Sally's going back to her car."

Wilbur curses under his breath and dashes out of the kitchen, and Tommy shoves at Tubbo until he can see out of the window as well. He opens it just a little to make sure he can hear, even though he's pretty sure he'd be able to with his enhanced hearing. Sue him, Tommy's nosy.

Sally's already by her car, and Tommy watches as Wilbur runs out into the rain. "Sally!" he calls out, and Sally turns. Her breath hitches, and Wilbur steps forward a little. It's like watching something straight out of a movie. Wilbur seems at a loss for words, and Tommy winces. Surely he'll be able to put something together. "Sally, I'm sorry!"

"Wil..." Sally trails off, face falling, and Tommy sucks in a breath through his teeth sympathetically. That's definitely an *I'm still cross with you* tone she's using. Before she can continue, though, Wilbur shakes his head.

"No, I've... I've been an idiot. You were right, I had my head up my ass, and I fucked up bad with you," Wilbur says, stepping closer. Tubbo and Tommy glance at each other, eyes wide in anticipation. "You have every right to leave me in the lurch right now, but *please*, just... let me show you that I'm-that I want to be with you!"

Sally's face softens, and Tommy squints. The rain's kind of getting in the way of seeing things, but he does see Wilbur get a little bit closer. "I shouldn't have been so harsh," she says, and Wilbur shakes his head.

"I needed to hear it," he insists, and her shoulders relax a little. "Sally, you are *incredible*. I've never met anyone who makes me feel the way you do. That's a ridiculously cheesy thing to say, I know, but it's true, I swear. You don't have to forgive me for being a moron, and I can't promise I won't be a moron in the future, but... I'll do whatever it takes to be the kind of man that you deserve. I'm a nervous wreck around you because I *want* that. I want *you*."

Tubbo and Tommy grab each other's arms-Tommy tries not to flinch-and wait with bated breath as Sally closes the gap between her and Wilbur. "You're already the man I deserve," she tells him, so quiet that Tommy almost misses it, and Wilbur nods, clearly dazed. Tubbo slaps his arm excitedly. "You just have to want it, and you can't be shy about it. Not with me."

"I want it," Wilbur says in a hushed whisper. He raises his head, and his posture shifts to a confidence so loud that Tommy barely recognizes it on him. "I want it. More than anything."

Tubbo nudges him. "D'you think they're gonna snog?" he asks, and Tommy makes a face, quickly shushing him as Wilbur steps just a *hair* closer to Sally.

"You make me loud," Wilbur tells her, a hand coming to rest on her waist.

"You make me soft," Sally tells him, tangling her fingers in the damp hair at the nape of his neck.

"Kiss me," Wilbur pleads, "and I'll be whatever you need me to be."

"I'll kiss you," Sally agrees, "and you'll just be you."

This is all rather melodramatic, in Tommy's opinion.

Like something straight out of one of Techno's shitty rom-coms.

Tommy's nose wrinkles as the two blurry forms in the rain get even closer, and he tugs Tubbo away from the window. "C'mon, Big T, we oughta go see boob boy," he says, and Tubbo rolls his eyes. They head out-Tommy grabs an umbrella, because he's not a moron-and Tommy cups his free hand around his mouth. "Hey, dickheads!

Public indecency! Get a room!"

Wilbur and Sally break apart, and Sally tilts her head back as she laughs. "Good thing I've got an appointment with my stylist tonight, you've gone and gotten my hair wet, dickhead," she says, smacking Wilbur's shoulder lightly. Tommy makes a face. "Where are you boys off to, then?"

"My aunt's fabric shop," Tubbo says easily, and Sally ruffles his hair.

Wilbur's still staring at Sally like a lovesick puppy, and Tommy pretends to gag. In all honesty, though, he's glad they've gotten their shit together. Wilbur will have even less time to bother him now. "If you'll excuse us, we have to be *not* gross somewhere else. You should try it sometime," he says, and Wilbur rolls his eyes.

"I believe that's 'Congratulations' in Tommy's language," Wilbur tells Sally, and Tommy steps on his toes. Wilbur grins. "I'd offer to drive you there, but I don't want to get Jubilee's leather seats damp."

Tommy flips him off and starts walking off towards Puffy's shop. Tubbo yelps as the cover of the umbrella moves past him, and he hurries to fall back in step with Tommy. The walk is quiet, if only because there's not much to talk about. Tommy's quite glad he's not going to have to deal with Wilbur and his stupid French poetry anymore. Not that Wilbur had used any of it in the end. Phil would probably say something dumb and sappy about spontaneity being a reflection of the true feelings of the heart. Thank fuck he's not here.

Tommy just thinks it's stupid how long it's taken the two of them to get together.

In any case, the cold's kind of getting to him by the time they make it to Puffy's shop, so Tommy makes a beeline for the coffeemaker in the back room. "Hey, you can't go in there-! Oh, it's just you, hi guys," Ranboo says as Tommy puts a hot chocolate pod in the machine. "Are you here to buy something, or are you here to bother me? Because I've got a customer in the shop right now, and Ms. Puffy's probably gonna get mad at some point if you keep scaring them off."

Tommy hears a slight kerfuffle. Tubbo's probably gone and hopped up on the counter. "Chill out, bossman, we're not gonna scare them off," he says, and Tommy snorts. The hot chocolate is almost ready. "Besides! Me n' Tommy are here to provide a cure for your Tuesday evening boredom. You can't tell me it's not boring, I've worked some summers here."

Taking his mug of hot chocolate out to the register, Tommy rolls his eyes. "And by 'worked,' he means sorting the magazines every once in a while," he says, and Ranboo snorts. Tubbo glares at him, and sure enough, he's on the counter. "Go get some hot chocolate, Tubs, Puffy's stocked the good shit. It's the kind you never have at your place."

Eyes wide, Tubbo darts into the back room, presumably to consume every last hot chocolate pod there is. Ranboo shakes his head, and Tommy grins lazily at him. "I think I've got everything, thanks for pointing me in the right direc-Tommy? Is that you?" Dream asks, currently holding a pile of dark red, burnt orange, and earthy black fabric. Tommy gives him a hesitant wave. As he puts the fabrics on the counter-and completely ignores Ranboo-Dream leans both elbows on the granite and tilts his head curiously. He's still got that stupid mask on. "It's been way too long, kid. I didn't know you worked here."

"I don't, I'm just here to visit my good pal Ranboo," he says, because The Sense itches at the back of his head and insists that he *doesn't* mention Tubbo is here with him. Tommy gestures to the fabric pile that Ranboo is currently ringing up, his grip on the mug a little tighter than he'd normally have it. "Do you need those for, like, curtains in the new office, or is it not finished yet?"

The corners of Dream's eyes crinkle. He's probably smiling. "Something like that," he says, still presumably smiling, and Tommy nods, taking another sip of the hot chocolate. Dream hands Ranboo his card absentmindedly; Tommy doesn't like how dismissive he's being. "Anyways, it's great to see you. Sucks that I can't stay for too long, but it's cool to meet one of your little friends."

He holds out a hand to Ranboo, who's finishing up bagging his fabrics, and Ranboo blinks in surprise before shaking it. He jumps

as if he's been burned, and Tommy puts a hand on his arm, brows furrowed. "Sorry, must've been static or something," Ranboo says, laughing nervously, and Dream tilts his head.

"My bad," he says, though what Tommy can see of his face remains blank. "Thanks for all your help. Ranboo, was it?"

"Uh, yeah," Ranboo says, and Dream nods. He gives them both a brief wave and turns to head out of the shop. The Sense is relieved, and Tommy's body loses its tension. Ranboo shakes his hand out a little. "You're friends with that guy?"

"I know him, I'm not *friends* with him. He works with Phil," Tommy says, eyes narrowed at the door as Tubbo comes to stand with the two of them, clearly already having had several cups of hot chocolate.

The Sense still doesn't like Dream, as it would appear.

"I'm here, bitch!" Tommy says, flopping down into the armchair and plopping his bag down at his feet.

"Language," Bad says without looking up from his keyboard. Tommy blows out a breath that makes the hair on his forehead flutter, and Bad sets his laptop to the side, smiling gently as he pulls his clipboard into his lap. "Afternoon, Tommy. How's your day going?"

"Horribly! Thanks. I'm head boy now, apparently, which means I have to spend most of my lunches going over my 'responsibilities' and sh-stuff," he says, slumping into the cushion, and Bad tilts his head curiously.

He jots something down-Tommy's less uneasy about it now, but it's still uncomfortable to know that someone's keeping track of the things he says. "Congratulations, that sounds like a really big accomplishment," Bad says, and Tommy just shrugs. He's not entirely convinced Quackity hasn't found out his secret identity and is using the whole head boy thing to keep an eye on him, even if there's no discernable signs of him knowing. Bad's brows furrow.

“You’re not happy about it?”

Tommy makes a face. “I don’t wanna talk about it,” he says, and Bad nods easily. He’s learned that Bad won’t push if he asks him not to, which he really appreciates. Tommy reconsiders for a moment, though; he *could* rephrase it as something inconspicuous and rant. “Actually... I sorta do. I mean, not a *lot*, but... if that’s okay?”

“Of course it is,” Bad says, pushing his glasses up, and Tommy nods, gripping the knees of his jeans nervously. Bad hands Tommy a stress ball, and Tommy squints at it before giving it a hesitant squeeze. “Why aren’t you happy about being head boy?”

“Well... so, like, my headteacher’s this great person, right? Super nice dude, fun to talk to, not at all like the last one, who got arrested,” he says, and while Bad looks mildly concerned at that, he gestures for Tommy to continue. “See, recently, I found out that he’s... not actually that great of a person. Or-maybe he still is, I don’t know, I just-he’s not the person I thought he was. I’m angry, a-and confused, and... I would’ve fuckin’ *jumped* at the chance to be head boy, like, three months ago, but now? Now, I’m just... too tired.”

Bad writes something down. He doesn’t even tell Tommy to watch the swearing, which means he’s about to say something important. “Your feelings are perfectly valid, first and foremost. You have every right to feel differently or even negatively about your headteacher now that you’ve found out whatever it is that you’ve found out,” Bad tells him, and Tommy nods, his grip on the stress ball tightening. “Can you tell me what you mean when you say you’re tired?”

Tommy makes a face. He doesn’t really know what he means. “I dunno, I’m just... tired,” he says, and Bad tilts his head. “I can’t- there’s no way to describe it, Bad, I’m-! I want everything to go back to the way it was, but I don’t at the same time! I *like* the way things are now! After it happened, me and Techno got close, and Tubbo’s happy now, and I’m finally talking to people about how I’m feeling! But before was so much *better*! I wasn’t shaky like I am now, I thought Quackity was *cool*, I wasn’t constantly overwhelmed by every fucking thing that happens to me!”

“When you say before,” Bad starts, and Tommy’s eyes widen, “what

do you mean by that?"

Shifting in his seat, Tommy passes the stress ball between his hands. "I don't want to talk about it," he mumbles, and Bad looks slightly disappointed, but he nods anyway. He really *does* respect whatever boundaries Tommy has around certain topics-namely, he respects the fact that Tommy never specifies what he means when he's referring to the effects of his alter ego-which is really handy.

"You said you and your brother, Techno... you two are closer now? After 'it' happened?" Bad asks, and Tommy nods, because it's true. It's one of the best things that's come out of him being Spider-Man, not that he'd ever admit it. "Were you not close before?"

Tommy shrugs and squeezes the stress ball some more. "Not really. After he started getting into, like, all his literature stuff, he stopped hanging out with me. Said I was too childish and annoying to hang out with anymore or something like that," he says, and Bad nods, writing something else down. Tommy swallows around the lump in his throat. "We're cool now, though. Best of friends, really."

Bad frowns. "How old were you and your other brother when he said that?" he asks, and Tommy tries to do the math in his head.

"I was... seven, I think? Maybe eight? Which means Wil would've been fifteen or sixteen," he says, nodding, and Bad writes some more. "It didn't make any sense, either, Techno was thirteen at the time, not exactly the pinnacle of maturity, y'know? Plus, it's not like he actually *said* it, he just... implied it. Before... the thing happened, me and Techno would only talk when we had to, or if I'd pissed him off enough."

"And Wilbur, was he close with Techno?" Bad asks, and Tommy shrugs.

"Yeah, him n' Techno liked to talk about Shakespeare and all that boring sh-stuff," Tommy says, lightly tossing the stress ball back and forth. Bad writes another note. "Me and Wilbur have always been really close, though. At least until-well, you get it. He really did try to be as good of a brother as he could, y'know? He was swamped with GCSEs and doing university early, but he didn't really miss out on

any of my life. Not like-well, that's not entirely fair, I suppose, it's not as though Techno could put his fencing stuff and scholarship applications on hold to go to my tenth birthday or some shit."

Bad frowns again, and Tommy preemptively rolls his eyes at the inevitable 'language,' but it never comes. "It's okay to be angry with Techno for not being as present as you'd like him to be, even if you can rationalize *why* he wasn't there," Bad says. "It's good that you *can* rationalize it-that you can understand his perspective-but it's alright to be angry, too."

Tommy just shakes his head with a sad smile. "Nah, I stopped being pissed at him for it ages ago, it's not like Phil or Kristin missed anything, I wasn't *missing out* or something," he says, and Bad jots down another note. "Plus, it's not as though Techno *hated* me. At least, I don't think he did. But like I said, it's fine now, none of this matters."

"It *does* matter," Bad tells him, and Tommy frowns down at the stress ball. "When we're hurt, especially by the people we love, that hurt can last for a long time. Even if we forgive that person, even if it was unintentional, even if they've changed, we're still allowed to feel hurt by their actions. Obviously, you can't wallow in anger your whole life, but it's healthy to acknowledge that you were hurt and how you felt as a result, and to find a way to move forward."

"I feel like I *could* wallow in anger my whole life, if I really tried," Tommy jokes, because the conversation's gotten a little *too* serious for his taste, and Bad rolls his eyes fondly. "I've never *really* been angry about it, though. I mean, if I think too hard about it, I start getting pissed, but I don't want to waste my time being mad when it's pretty much fixed itself."

Bad chuckles. "I'm obligated to tell you that it's best to work through your feelings before you try and move on from them," he says, and Tommy grins.

"I know."

"You're not going to take that advice, are you?" Bad asks, and Tommy shakes his head.

"No, but great effort, big man, almost had me for a second there," Tommy says, tossing the stress ball up in the air. "Anyways, I've been having this, like, *weird* phobia of vents lately, and I think I might be claustrophobic."

Bad blinks at him. "It never fails to surprise me when you veer off the topic of conversation so abruptly," he mutters, and he scribbles something down. Tommy just keeps tossing the stress ball. He needs to know how to get over his weird thing with vents, just in case he needs to do another stealth operation. Bad takes his glasses off and wipes them with a little microfiber cloth; Tommy's tempted to call him a dork. "Well, if you *are* claustrophobic, it would probably stem from something that you experienced. Is there anything specific about vents, or is it just random?"

Well, Tommy can't exactly tell him that it's because every time he'd been in a vent, he'd been crawling towards his headteacher-slash-maniac's location to spy on him and hopefully defeat him in a physical altercation. He probably shouldn't mention that he's been crawling through vents at all.

"It's pretty random," he says instead, and while Bad can obviously tell he's lying, he doesn't push Tommy to tell the truth. For a brief moment, he's reminded of hallucination-Ranboo; *'I'm in danger every day.'* He shudders. "Bad, do you think I'm a liar?"

If Bad hadn't been surprised by the claustrophobia comment out of nowhere, he's definitely surprised now. "Do I think you're a liar?" he repeats, probably for clarification, and Tommy nods, brows furrowed and hands back to squeezing the life out of the poor stress ball. "Well, Tommy, I think we all tell lies sometimes-"

"That's not what I asked," Tommy cuts in, frustrated, and he sighs. "Sorry, I shouldn't interrupt, I just... I have to know, okay? *I have* to. So even if it means pointing out something *else* that's wrong with me, I need you to be honest with me."

Because if Bad-of all people-thinks he's a liar, then that means Tommy's fear manifestations are right, and he *really* doesn't want them to be. Bad taps his pen on the clipboard idly. "I don't think you're a liar," he says, after a moment of deliberation, and the stress

ball is not at risk of exploding anymore. "I think you have a hard time confiding in people."

"Isn't that just... lying by omission, or whatever?" Tommy asks, and he hopes he doesn't forget to hold back his strength this time. He's already had to apologize to Bad for breaking two stress balls during their last session, and he'd really prefer not to do it again. "I just... if I don't tell people things, things that they might need to know... doesn't that make me a liar?"

Bad frowns thoughtfully. "I think that you try your hardest not to burden other people with your problems, and I think that doing that makes you doubt your own judgement," he says, and Tommy gnaws nervously at his bottom lip. "If you're asking me whether or not you're a compulsive liar, my answer is no, you're not. If you're asking me if you have issues with being completely and transparently honest about your emotions, I'd say yes, but that doesn't mean you're a bad person or a liar in general."

Exasperated, Tommy slumps back in his seat. "But if I'm not honest, that makes me a liar! That's literally what being a liar *is*!" he says, and Bad smiles sadly at him.

"You're not being purposefully *dishonest*, you just have a hard time talking about how you feel," Bad tells him, and Tommy thinks that's a load of bullshit. "Everybody lies, Tommy, that's just a part of life. Lies are complicated. Whether it's to protect someone else's feelings, to keep someone physically safe, or just because you don't want to get in trouble, lying's pretty normal. I'd be worried if you *never* lied, and I'd be worried if you lied *constantly*. I'm not advocating that you lie about everything all the time, but I definitely wouldn't say you have a problem with lying."

"I just... sometimes I wonder if I'm a bad person for keeping secrets," Tommy says. "And before you say anything, I know I'm not, it's just-it's hard to *feel* like I'm not. Even if I'm keeping something from someone to keep them safe, it's still hurting them, and I don't *want* to hurt people. I don't want to hurt *anyone*, Bad."

Bad's brows furrow. "Emotionally, or physically?" he asks, and Tommy blinks at him. "You said the word 'hurt' differently the second

time. I just wasn't sure if you meant something else just then."

At that, Tommy takes a pause. He really *doesn't* want to hurt people in either way, and while-technically speaking-fighting bad guys is a good thing, it's not like he finds any joy in the act of punching people in the face or kicking them down alleyways. The idea of providing justice is what makes him happy. "I don't know," he admits, and Bad writes something else down. "I'm not a *violent* person, I don't-I don't ever fight anyone"-not with his civilian identity, anyway-"and I don't want to hurt people *emotionally*, either, I... I don't know. I thought I had a good thing going, but I'm realizing that... for all the good I'm doing, it's hurting *me*. I don't know how to deal with that."

"How's it hurting you?" Bad asks, and while he probably has no idea what Tommy's talking about, it *does* help to talk through it out loud. "Is this about your panic attacks?"

"No, it's not-well, kind of...? I mean, I never *had* panic attacks before, not like these, anyway, and now I'm just... everything makes me jumpy, I can't trust people as easily anymore," he says, and The Sense pricks the back of his head in annoyance, as if it's offended that he's implying it has a downside. "I'm always on guard except for when I'm with my friends, but I think that might be changing, and I don't *want* to be on guard all the time, Bad, it's fucking *exhausting*."

It is. Tommy can't stop looking at Tubbo and flinching at the memory of the Pseudo-Tubbo from the hallucination gas. He can't stop thinking about the hands on his shoulders and whispers to abandon the mirage of Wilbur whenever he makes eye contact with Techno. If Tommy can't even feel safe with the people who know his secret identity, if he can't even get over his bullshit with *them*, who is he supposed to seek comfort in?

Is he *allowed* to seek comfort anymore?

Bad gives him a sympathetic look. "Would it be at all possible for you to tell them that that's how you feel?" he asks, and Tommy shrugs. "If there's a particular reason or trigger that makes you feel as though you have to guard yourself off, you can tell them that. It's okay to set boundaries, and it's especially important that your friends and your family respect those boundaries."

While Tommy isn't sure if it stems from one thing in particular, it can't hurt to boss Techno and Tubbo around and pull the 'my therapist told me to' card. "I don't know exactly where it comes from, though," he says, and Bad nods. "I just... it's this weird sort of heavy weight in my gut that makes me want to stop the conversation and tell everyone to leave me alone."

"I'm gonna bring out the T-word," Bad warns him, and Tommy groans, throwing his head back against the chair. "That sounds like a trauma response, Tommy. If it feels like you're shutting down in the middle of a conversation for what seems like no particular reason, I want you to take a minute to think, if you can. Try to figure out what was said or what you felt or what sensation made you shut down. If you can do that, we can pinpoint where that response is coming from, and we can move forward from there."

"I hate it when you bring the T-word into things," Tommy grumbles, because he doesn't like to frame his bad experiences as Spider-Man as some big traumatic thing. They're just... bumps in the road. The word 'trauma' makes it feel like a much more serious ordeal than it is, and Tommy doesn't want to have to think about that for too long. Maybe that's a problem in itself, but he'd rather not tackle his meta-anxiety right now. He sighs and looks at Bad again. "Fine. I'll try to figure it out."

He hasn't decided if that's a lie yet, but Bad looks pleased.

I hope y'all liked this chapter!!! It was very fun to write :)

I just wanted to say that if you guys happen to post anything about guided evolution on Tumblr or Twitter or whatever platform you use, whether it's theories, thoughts, etc, please please please tag them with the title or my user or something!!! I came across a really sweet post the other day on my dash and I absolutely lost my mind, lol! It's insane to think that y'all talk about the fic at all outside of the comments lmao

jack manifold, PI

Chapter 36: jack manifold, PI

A peek into Jack's ongoing investigation.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Slamming his mug down on the desk, Jack scrubs a hand over his face and groans.

He's been awake for over seventy-two hours now.

It's been so fucking long since they've had a case, and he can't afford to lose out on this one, all things considered. There have been so many dead ends, so many pointless files, so many hours wasted on looking through interviews and Twitter threads. Jack's been living off of coffee and ramen noodles since they'd started this case, and he's honestly getting pretty sick of picante chicken, considering it's the only flavor they have left at the office.

Jack is of the philosophy that one's workspace reflects oneself, which would explain why his office is an utter pigsty. It's messy and unorganized, much like his scrambled brain. It looks like shit, and he *feels* like shit. He should probably sleep at some point, but he hates the thought of missing out on a call that could crack this whole fucking case open.

Since he's so scatterbrained, Jack is *really* glad he'd hired an assistant. Hopefully, Sneeg'll be in soon, and then Jack can properly get to work. Admittedly, he's been a little discouraged for the past six hours. He can only read so much mindless drivel before he properly goes insane, and if he's got someone to push his mindless drivel off on, he can get to the good stuff.

Then again, Jack doesn't really want to stop looking through this particular file until *something* sticks out. It's been haunting him for days now, and he just can't seem to find the right information to nail this guy. He *knows* it's all bullshit, he just can't prove it. And since the guy's got enough plausible deniability, anything remotely circumstantial won't hold up in court if, God forbid, this ever *makes* it to court. He wonders idly if Sneeg's found anything, but then again, Sneeg never does any work past closing hours.

Speak of the devil, the bell on the door chimes.

"You look like shit this morning," Sneeg says, swapping out the empty mug for a full one, and Jack mumbles a thanks as he grabs it and chugs it. Sneeg snorts at him, amused. Jack flips him off. "Christ, man, at least take a power nap or something. Can't exactly track down a birth certificate if you're on the verge of passing out every few minutes."

Jack grunts and starts to shuffle through the mess of papers covering his desk. "I'm still trying to find any *hint* of forgery here, and there's fucking nothing," he says, and Sneeg gives him a sympathetic grimace, moving towards the filing cabinets. Jack fucking hates it when Sneeg reorganizes the folders-Jack keeps them alphabetical, Sneeg likes them by date-but he's too tired to give a shit.

Sifting through the files, Sneeg hums. "Did you want me to get started on the other thing our anonymous friend wants us to find information on?" he asks, and Jack just shrugs helplessly, shifting through tax returns and travel itineraries. This Schlatt guy has been to so many fucking countries that it's maddening. Sneeg blows out a breath and settles down at his desk in the corner of the room. "Okay, well, I guess I'll just... look pointlessly at more citizenship stuff."

"Seriously, how can one man be in six different places at the same fucking time?!" Jack huffs, and he crinkles the edge of the sheet with how hard he's gripping it. Sneeg rolls his eyes and tosses a file to him. Jack barely catches it, opening it up to see the logo of a biological research and development company. "The hell is this?"

Sneeg raises a brow and gets back up, collecting the pile of

scattered papers from Jack's desk and placing them on his own. "You've been trying to find proof that Schlatt's not an actual citizen for how many days now? Take a break, work on the other thing," he says, and Jack glares at him. "Don't look at me like that, dumbass, we have to sniff this shit out anyway, might as well get it done now."

To Sneeg's credit, he's right. Jack's been so focused on figuring out Schlatt that he's been neglecting the other parts of the investigation. The anonymous letter had come in a massive manila envelope with fifty thousand pounds and a promise of fifty thousand more once three things had been found. Namely, Spider-Man's identity, proof that Schlatt's citizenship status is forged, and details of a project from that biological research and development company that's apparently called Guided Evolution.

And Jack could *really* use that money.

He's not exactly the world's most popular detective, and rent is really fucking expensive. But he's a damn good detective, and if he manages to find Spider-Man's identity of all things, it'll be great for both him *and* Sneeg. Now, morally speaking, Jack's kind of opposed to the whole idea of exposing Spider-Man's secret identity, but financially speaking, he really doesn't have a choice.

Does this make it likely that it's one of the freak supervillains that's hired him? Yes. Is Jack broke enough to look past that? Also yes. He doesn't really have a dog in the fight between Spider-Man and the circus of villains that are after him-the city of London could burn down, for all he cares. Besides, it's not as if Spider-Man's been particularly careful.

Sneeg had dug up some old CCTV footage, and Spider-Man drops into the same alleyway after almost every fight. He's got a duffel bag there, in fact. Of course, the footage is black and white, and Spider-Man always makes sure to stay turned away from the camera-and in the instances he seems to forget, the footage is always mysteriously corrupted-so Jack doesn't really have many details to go off of. No outlandish clothes, no tattoos, no piercings, no definitive hairstyle. It's quite frustrating, but Jack's a stubborn bastard; he's not going to give up so easily.

But as of right now, he's going to try to focus on that Guided Evolution thing.

Jack sifts through paper after paper, file after file about mundane financial shit he barely understands. Nothing's tied to the elusive project, but there *are* some statements that lead to nowhere, which is interesting. There's a shitload of funding that's being funneled to an architecture firm, but that doesn't stand out to Jack as suspicious. After all, it's not unusual or implicating to be building a new facility for laboratories or whatever the hell biological research and development companies do.

He shuffles through a few more papers. Public research projects, transference of medical equipment, nothing about Guided Evolution. "It's obviously not going to be in any publicly available documents, and we've not yet got the resources or proof to get a warrant for their databases," Jack huffs, tossing down the file, and Sneeg hums. He doesn't bother to look up from the Schlatt documents, and Jack throws a pen at him. "I think our easiest solve will be the Spider-Man issue."

"See, I'm-I don't know if I feel entirely comfortable figuring out who Spider-Man is," Sneeg says, and Jack makes a face. There are fifty *thousand* pounds on the line here, and Sneeg's worried about being *comfortable*? "Listen, it's not like discussing the ethical ramifications of outing Spider-Man's identity during work hours is a pastime of mine, I just think that we should probably make sure this is what we want to do."

"Sneeg, do I look like a man who cares about ethics?" Jack asks, and Sneeg gives him a flat stare, blinking slowly. Jack snaps his fingers. "Exactly. Now, is Spider-Man out fighting crime, or do we have to wait before we corner him in a shady alleyway?"

Sneeg grimaces as he takes out his phone. "Don't phrase it like that, man, you make it sound like we're creeps," he says, and Jack rolls his chair towards Sneeg's. "Well, it looks like he went to fight the mushroom dude and the guy with the electric glove-

"404 and Boss," Jack corrects, and Sneeg stares blankly at him. "I'm not *totally* out of the loop, mate, Jesus."

"As I was *saying*, he went to fight those fuckers, like, ten minutes ago," Sneeg tells him as he turns off his phone and tucks it back into his pocket. "But like I told you, I don't know if I want to go all Sherlock Holmes on this guy."

Jack snorts as he stands and walks over to grab his coat from the coat rack. "C'mon, don't tell me you're one of his Twitter stans," he jokes, and Sneeg pretends to gag. "That's what I thought, now get your ass over here."

"I *just* got to the office, man," Sneeg grumbles, though he does put his scarf back on. He hadn't had the chance to take off his coat yet, evidently. Jack nods towards the door and holds it open, and Sneeg follows him out. "I still don't think we should be doing this. Feels shady."

"We're *private investigators*, Sneeg," Jack says, "everything we *do* is shady."

"That's objectively untrue, and technically speaking, I'm not even a private investigator, I'm just your 'executive assistant,' but okay," Sneeg says, and the two of them start heading down the road. Sneeg shivers, and Jack lets out a puff of air. He can see it. It's cold as shit. Sneeg points up ahead towards a side street. "We should head that way. Hopefully, Spider-Man won't be there by the time we get there. I don't want to get my ass kicked."

Jack scoffs, following Sneeg down the side street. "What, you don't think I could fight him?" he asks, and Sneeg snorts. "I could totally fuckin' take him, man, I'm strong as shit, I'm an absolute Chad, yeah?"

Sneeg stops, as does Jack, and he puts a hand on Jack's shoulder, face flat. "Spider-Man could absolutely fucking annihilate you in a fistfight. I'm pretty sure he could breathe on you and you'd evaporate," he says, and he keeps walking.

Jack catches up after a minute, mumbling curses under his breath. Spider-Man's great, sure, but he's still not convinced the whole thing isn't just smoke and mirrors. Jack is a man of science and proof, thank you very much, and superpowers seem way too farfetched to

be true. Most of the villains that Spider-Man faces up against derive their power from different kinds of technology, after all; 404 has the spore gun, Blaze has drones and bombs, and Boss has that electric gauntlet thing. He's still not entirely sure about the one villain that had blown up on Twitter recently, but he's fairly certain the guy's just fucking with electromagnetic fields to manipulate metal.

Everything has a scientific explanation. Jack doesn't like to put all his eggs in one basket when it comes to blind faith, not when it could backfire so terribly. That's why he puts stock in the facts, in what he can prove to be true. He can have a grasp on the technology that the villains use, even if he doesn't fully understand the specs. But Spider-Man having the powers of a spider for no apparent reason? That's just absurd.

Jack follows Sneeg down a few more main roads and side streets until they start to filter into one of the more residential areas of London. "How much d'you wanna bet he lives somewhere around here?" Jack asks, narrowing his eyes at the nearby suburban bullshitery. "If his alleyway is nearby, he's probably within a couple kilometers' radius. Closer, if you take into consideration the fact that he has to walk home wounded quite a bit."

Humming uncertainly, Sneeg leads him towards yet another side street. "I don't know, he could've chosen a suburban area to park in to look inconspicuous, then driven to wherever he actually lives once he's gotten from the alleyway to his car," he says, and Jack doesn't really see that theory playing out, but it can't hurt to explore it. Sneeg stops at the mouth of the alleyway and points. "We'll find the bag somewhere down there. Want me to come with, or do you want me to keep a lookout?"

"Might as well come with. You could look for tire tracks that the blind spots of the CCTV don't pick up," Jack suggests, and Sneeg nods as the two of them make their way into the alley. The alley itself isn't horrible, just the typical amount of London grossness, but there's no sign of a duffel bag yet. "Found anything?"

Jack looks over at Sneeg, who shakes his head, eyes still scanning the pavement for any hint of tire tracks. "The alley's big enough to fit a midsize sedan. Perfect car for blending in with prissy suburban

moms,” Sneeg says, and Jack has to give that one to him. “Hundreds of cars drive by this place every damn day, though, so it’ll be hard to narrow it down, if my theory’s the case.”

Moving a little further down the alleyway, Jack spots a dumpster-the same dumpster seen in most of the CCTV footage, to be exact. “Hey, Sneeg, I think I found where he’s been stashing his duffel,” Jack says, and he starts to push the dumpster out of the way. Sure enough, there are pre-existing tracks on the ground, and behind it is a hefty-looking duffel stuffed up against the wall of the alley.

Sneeg makes a face. “Gross, but most people wandering by probably wouldn’t think or *want* to look there. Smart guy,” he commends, grabbing the duffel as Jack starts to move the dumpster back. Sneeg stops him, a hand on his arm. “Woah, hey, we’re gonna have to put the duffel back once we look through it. We can’t just steal Spider-Man’s stuff.”

“Why the hell can’t we? We could take it in for prints, find out his identity like *that!*” Jack says, punctuating it with a snap of his fingers, and Sneeg gives him a flat look.

“Because, moron, whoever’s been fucking with the CCTV is probably doing it to protect Spider-Man’s identity-might even be the guy himself-so if we take the duffel, they’ll find *us*, and then our whole operation is fuckin’ over,” Sneeg says, and Jack reluctantly admits to himself that he’s got a point. So he leaves the dumpster be for now as Sneeg unzips the duffel.

Jack starts to sift through the contents of it. “Right, we’ve got a spare change of clothes, nothing incriminating,” he mutters, tucking the plain blue jumper and jeans under his arm. Sneeg hums, taking out a water bottle. It’s unopened, meaning they can’t swab it for DNA or anything like that. Unfortunate, but he hadn’t had high hopes in the first place. Jack grabs something soft and small, and he frowns. “The fuck is this?”

He takes it out, and both he and Sneeg squint. It’s a tiny plush of a cow with big button eyes; it’s got patches, too. It’s quite cute, but Jack’s got no fucking idea why Spider-Man would be lugging this thing around. “What if he’s got a kid?” Sneeg asks, and Jack’s eyes

go wide.

"There's no way Spider-Man has a kid, he's out at all kinds of weird hours," Jack says, waving the plush around dismissively. "Plus, he always starts his patrols *right* when school hours end, so he can't have a kid, he-oh, *shit*."

The two of them look at each other with wide eyes, and Jack's fairly certain they've come to the same conclusion.

Spider-Man *is* a kid.

"Okay, but he can't be, like, a *kid* kid, that fucker's six foot something," Jack says as they make their way to reception, and Sneeg just sighs. Yeah, so maybe the fact that Spider-Man is *way* too young to be a superhero is bothering him a little. And maybe the fact that Jack is being paid a small fortune to reveal the identity of a kid is making him a bit queasy.

Sneeg elbows him. "Would you shut up? This is our *one* chance at getting some kind of lead into Guided Evolution, stop thinking about Spider-Man and focus," he mutters, and Jack nods, taking a few deep breaths. He'll put it in the back of his mind for now. Sneeg gives the receptionist an attempt at a charming smile-Jack just thinks he looks like a prick. "Hey, we're here on behalf of a client, we'd like to ask your higher-ups a few questions about a project."

"Do you have an appointment?" the receptionist asks, brows raised, and Jack exchanges a look with Sneeg. They'd been trying to call ahead to book an appointment for the past couple of weeks, but apparently, the company-it's called *Smile Research*, which is a creepy name, in Jack's opinion-doesn't take appointments from citizens, unless it's for voluntary testing.

"I would *like* to say yes," Jack tells him, and the receptionist gives him a mock-sympathetic smile. Asshole. "Right, well, can we *make* an appointment, then?"

"And what corporation are you with?" the receptionist asks,

seemingly amused, and Sneeg glances nervously at Jack. They don't really have an answer. The receptionist gives them another smile, but he doesn't bother with the mock-sympathy anymore. "I'm sorry, but I can't give you clearance to use the lift nor can I allow you to ask anyone about anything if you don't have an appointment. Come back and visit us soon!"

Jack sighs and turns away, and Sneeg gives his shoulder a sympathetic pat. "We'll get 'em next time, we just have to get an appointment," Sneeg reassures him, and Jack's probably going to take a failure nap as soon as they get back to the office.

"Let's get that done so I can get home to my boys on time, alright? Now, make sure you take care of packing that stuff up, it has to go to the new headquarters as *soon* as it's done," someone says, and Jack turns to see a rather busy-looking woman with an assistant by her side. To his utter surprise, the woman stops and stares at him, clearly a little startled, before making her way over and offering a hand. "Hi! I thought I recognized you, aren't you Jack? I'm Wilbur's mom, Kristin, he was showing me pictures from brunch the other day!"

"Uh, yes, ma'am, I am," he says, shaking her hand, and Sneeg raises a brow at him. Kristin smiles at him, and Jack adjusts his coat. "I'm a private investigator. My assistant and I were hoping to ask a few questions about a project your company's working on, but we can't get in without an appointment. Is there any chance you could...?"

Kristin nods. "Oh, yeah, that's no problem! Come with me, we can talk in my office," she says, still smiling, and Sneeg gives Jack an approving nod as they follow her into the lift, much to the chagrin of the receptionist. "Any friend of Wil's is a friend of mine."

Well, that's rather convenient.

The lift ride is quiet and *long*. Kristin apparently works on one of the highest floors in the building, and Jack's not exactly the world's biggest fan of heights. Sneeg clears his throat. "So, you, uh, have a kid?" he asks, and Jack is very violently reminded of the fact that Spider-Man is likely a child. Likely *someone's* child.

“Three boys,” Kristin says, and Jack whistles lowly. He’d known about Tommy, but he hadn’t realized Wilbur’s got *another* brother to deal with. If that brother is anything like Tommy, Jack might actually feel some amount of pity for Wilbur. “Wil’s our oldest, then Techno, and Tommy’s our youngest. They’re a real handful, considering they all still live at home. Do you have any kids?”

“Oh, *God*, no,” Sneeg says, and Jack elbows him. Kristin just chuckles-thankfully, they’ve not offended her. At least they’ve still got a chance to get a lead. As the lift doors open, Sneeg clears his throat. “Right, um, how long have you been working here?”

Kristin hums as she leads them down the impeccably clean hallway. “A little before the turnover from our old CEO to the new one. He’s really young, but he’s got a lot of ambition,” she says, holding the door to her office open. Jack and Sneeg settle into the armchairs in front of Kristin’s desk, and she sits behind it, an easy smile on her face as she folds her hands in front of her. “So, what can I help you boys with today?”

Jack exchanges a wary look with Sneeg, because he’s not entirely sure if his new friendship with Wilbur is enough to get him some clearly confidential information. “Well, we were hoping to find out about one of your projects,” he says, and Kristin nods eagerly. It’s clear that she’s passionate about her work, which is great for them, because it means she’ll be more likely to talk about it. “It’s called ‘Guided Evolution,’ if I recall correctly.”

Kristin’s brows furrow. “I can’t say I’ve even *heard* of that project,” she says apologetically, and Jack sighs. It’s not her fault, but he *is* still frustrated. The only portion of this investigation that they’ve made progress on has lost *all* of its appeal, and the other two feel like dead ends. Kristin holds up a finger and starts to type. “Let me check our databases for you, see if I can find someone who might know something.”

“We’d really appreciate that, miss, thank you,” Jack says, and Kristin smiles absentmindedly as she types and clicks. He turns to Sneeg and huffs out a relieved sigh. “Thank fuck we’re actually making some progress. I am going to take the world’s longest victory nap when we get back.”

"You do that, I'll call our guy, and then we can all go home early," Sneeg says, and Jack has never been more grateful for him.

Kristin clicks her tongue. Oh, no, that's not the expression of someone that's found out crucial information that Jack very desperately needs to impress their anonymous client, that's the expression of someone who can't find anything. Jack would know, because he's seen that expression in the mirror every day for the past few weeks.

She gives them a sympathetic smile, and Jack swears under his breath. "I'm sorry, I really can't find anything. It might be from a higher clearance level," she says, and while Jack is incredibly annoyed, he's not going to take it out on poor Kristin. She's been nothing but helpful. "I can see if a higher-up would be willing to talk to you guys, though!"

Jack perks up a little at that, and Sneeg gives him a hopeful look. "Oh, really? That would be—"

"Hey, Kristin, d'you have a minute?" someone asks from behind them, and Jack turns to see a vaguely familiar man standing in the doorway. He blinks in surprise, then puts on an easy grin that makes Jack's detective instincts go on high alert. "My bad, didn't know you had guests! Who are these guys?"

"Sapnap, this is Jack and Sneeg, Jack and Sneeg, this is Sapnap," Kristin says, completely at ease still, and Jack stands to shake Sapnap's hand. Sneeg follows suit, and Sapnap leans against the doorframe, faking nonchalance. "What brings you all the way from the penthouse?"

Sapnap huffs out a laugh at that—it must be an inside joke—and smiles. "Well, to be perfectly honest with you, we got an alert that someone was searching the databases for a project. You didn't find anything?" he asks, and Kristin shakes her head. Jack narrows his eyes; that's an oddly suspicious thing to say. "So, uh, what're you two doing here?"

"We're private investigators, we're here to ask about the project she searched up, actually," Jack says, and Sneeg steps on his toes.

Jack's not going to let some entitled prick in a suit and tie intimidate him into stopping the search. He's got more dignity than that. "Kristin couldn't find anything, but she *did* say that might be because she doesn't have high enough clearance. Would you happen to know anything about a project called 'Guided Evolution?'"

Sapnap pales. It's minute, not nearly noticeable enough for a normal person to pick up on without specifically looking for it, but Jack's no ordinary person, and he's *definitely* looking for it. Sneeg evidently sees it as well, because he nudges Jack's foot with his own. Sapnap runs a hand through his hair-might be a nervous habit, might not be.

"Can't say I have, man. Sorry," Sapnap says, and Jack is rather unimpressed. Sapnap is slightly shifting from foot to foot, and he rolls his left shoulder every couple of seconds. Now that's a nervous habit for *sure*. "You guys probably have the wrong company. We've never had a project under that name, and we don't plan on naming any of our upcoming projects anything close to that. Sounds like you got a false tip."

"And it sounds like you're nervous," Jack says, making direct eye contact, and Sapnap shifts his gaze to Kristin, who's rather unsettled, glancing back and forth between him and Sapnap. He's got no doubt that she's just genuinely confused; either that, or she's an *impressive* liar. There's nothing nervous or angry about her body language, unlike the dictionary definition of suspicious in her doorway. "Sapnap, was it? Yeah, alright. Sapnap, I don't know if you know this, but when people try not to look nervous or suspicious, their whole demeanor becomes a *lot* more obvious."

"You're shifting back and forth, you're rolling your shoulder, and you're looking to the people that *aren't* directly confronting you," Sneeg recites, like he's a goddamned textbook, and Jack makes a mental note to buy him a coffee after this. "Jack and I are damn good detectives. If you don't want to answer questions, it's your right under the law, because we're not cops, but don't give us a piss-poor lie, man. Have some integrity."

Sapnap's smile drops. "We've never headed a project called 'Guided Evolution.' Your sources are mistaken. I'm calling security," he says, and Jack glares at him.

Kristin gets up from behind the desk and holds out her hands placatingly. "Okay, no need for that, they can just go. If it's not a big deal, if there's no project, then there's no need to call security," she reasons, and Sapnap sighs.

"You two are lucky that it's *Kristin's* office you're in right now," he says, and Jack crosses his arms. "Fine. I won't call security for *now*, but if you're not out of the building in ten minutes, I'm calling the *cops*. Got it?"

Jack and Sneeg give him a short nod, and Sapnap gives Kristin a brief nod of his own before leaving the office and heading down the hall. "Sorry we've caused you trouble, miss," Jack says, and Kristin waves dismissively.

"Oh, don't be, you haven't! Sapnap's just got a bit of a short temper. He's a good guy, just a little overprotective when it comes to our research and development projects," she says, and Jack nods. She seems to wholeheartedly believe that that's the case, and he's not about to tell her any differently. Kristin gives the two of them a sympathetic smile. "Sorry I wasn't a ton of help. At least now you know there's nothing here, right?"

Sneeg goes to say something, but Jack cuts him off. "Right. Thanks again for searching the database," he says, and her smile turns warm. "We ought to get out of here before he calls security. Sorry we've disturbed your day."

"It's no problem, really, I'm just sorry you're getting kicked out," she says, apologetic, and Jack just shrugs it off.

Sneeg gives Jack a scrutinizing glare, and Jack elbows him. "We'll be on our way, then," Jack says, and he leads Sneeg back down the hall to the lift. Sneeg's being a pouty asshole; Jack would be just as frustrated, but he hadn't had high expectations to begin with. "Listen, Sneeg, we'll find something eventually. If we have to skirt around the law, then we'll do that."

"Yeah, yeah, I know, I'm just fuckin' bummed out, man, I really thought we had it," Sneeg says, and Jack pats his shoulder. Sneeg pushes the button to call the lift, and Jack leans against the wall,

tucking his hands in his coat pockets. Sneeg pulls out his phone. "Right, well, have you seen Twitter lately? Everybody's feeling bad for Spider-Man."

"Now that I know he's a kid, I feel bad for him too," Jack mutters as the lift doors open, and someone in a white mask walks past them. They get into the lift and start to head down. "We can't *not* take this case, Sneeg."

"I know," Sneeg says, and his face portrays exactly what Jack is feeling.

They're gonna have to give their anonymous little friend some false answers.

Wooooo! I hope this chapter gives you guys a little insight into some of the non-Tommy-centric parts of the story. It's always a challenge to balance it, I hope I'm doing a semi-decent job of it, lol!

Also, I'm currently writing one of the most devastating chapters so far, and I cannot *wait* to get to this angst. You might be asking yourself, "Moosh, what could possibly be worse than a nightmare hallucination sequence of Tommy's worst fears?" I see that, and I raise you: Uncle Ben.

Well, kinda. ;)

In any case, you guys are super sweet!! Thank you for tagging your posts, I'm always grinning like a big ol' dope whenever I go to look at them :D

you're at the party

Chapter 37: you're at the party

Tommy, Ranboo, and Tubbo go to Purpled's party.

CW for slight body horror (ish?) in this chapter!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Tommy's a little skeptical.

The house is practically booming with the bass from the music-and Tommy's still standing outside with Tubbo and Ranboo-and there are tons of people in the yard as well. It's a huge party, evidently, which is why Tommy isn't a hundred percent certain that they're welcome here, considering that Ranboo brought *pretzel sticks*.

"It's good manners to bring something to a party!" he protests when Tommy laughs at his dorky little bowl, and Tubbo gives his shoulder a sympathetic pat. Ranboo just sighs and turns towards the house, not yet walking towards it. "Are we absolutely certain that we want to go to a party? I mean, there's *gotta* be something else we can do."

"No, we're going, because we're *cool*, and Purpled is, like, the weirdest fucking kid I've ever met, so I wanna see what his house looks like," Tommy says, leading the way towards the front door. It's unlocked, and as he goes to open it, he's abruptly tugged in by someone opening it from the inside. The music gets about five hundred times louder, and Tommy winces at the volume. "Oh, hello,

Purpled! Sorry we're late, had to find an excuse for the old man, y'see, it's a crazy story, really-"

"I don't care," Purpled tells him, and Tommy clicks his tongue, doing finger guns that definitely aren't nerdy. Ranboo offers up the bowl as Tubbo glowers at Purpled, and Purpled takes it; he looks rather skeptical. "Are these... pretzel sticks?"

Ranboo nods. "I wasn't sure if we were supposed to be bringing snacks," he says, clearly trying to sound cheerful and coming off as nothing but painfully awkward. Tommy cringes. At Purpled's blank expression, Ranboo starts to nervously ramble. "See, I wasn't sure if it was, like, a potluck sort of situation or an all-expenses-paid type thing-I guess that would be an all-snacks-provided thing, not an expenses-because a party wouldn't have expenses. Unless it does? Did you need money for this?"

Tommy buries his head in his hands, but to his surprise, Purpled lets out a bark of a laugh and opens up the door all the way. "You three are such morons," he says, and Tommy flips him off as Tubbo pushes past them into the house. Purpled huffs. "Come on in, I guess. There's drinks in the kitchen. Stay away from the counter near the sink and the stuff in the coolers, keep to the fridge. That's where the non-alcoholic stuff is."

Scoffing, Tommy squeezes past a few pairs of university-aged kids and makes his way into the kitchen. "Oh, I can *handle* my alcohol, Purpled, I am the world's most hardcore man, I can drink *circles* around you," he says, in spite of never having had a drop of alcohol in his life, and he is abruptly lifted up by the neck of his shirt. With a yelp, he starts to struggle. "Hands off, bitch! Precious cargo!"

"This is the company you keep? Purpled, you need better friends," the guy holding him says, and Tommy kicks at his ankles. The guy abruptly puts him down, and Tommy whirls around, ready to fight the son of a bitch that had just picked him up like a goddamned cat, but the guy just offers his hand. "Name's Punz. I'm his brother."

"Must be awful," Tubbo says, nodding sympathetically, and Ranboo elbows him. Tommy just keeps glaring at Punz, even as he shakes the guy's hand. Tubbo blows out an annoyed sigh and opens up the

fridge. "You've not got anything good."

"Don't drink or I'll have your head, got it?" Punz says, mostly directing it at Purpled, but it's fairly obvious that it goes for all of them. "Unless one of you is of age or whatever. Just don't be stupid about it if you are."

Ranboo gives him a salute. Tommy snorts; Ranboo's such a fucking weirdo. Punz leaves the kitchen, yelling after some guy, and Tommy starts to sort through the selection in the pair of coolers closest to the door, just to see what's there. "Don't even fucking think about it," Tubbo warns him, shoving a water bottle into his hands and yanking him down to mutter in his ear. "We have no clue what alcohol would do to you, so stay away from it, got it?"

Sighing, Tommy nods. That's fair. Not as though he'd been planning on drinking anyway. Purpled hops up on the counter, and Tommy taps his knee with the water bottle. "So, why'd you invite us?" he asks. "And I mean *really* why, it's not like you're super close with any of us."

"Like I told you, I don't know anybody here and I don't feel like navigating through a sea of drunk morons on my own," Purpled says, and Tommy nods. That's a good enough explanation, Tommy would probably feel the same way if Techno suddenly invited a bunch of kids from his uni to their house. Not like Techno has many friends, but still. "Anyways, we've got a Switch hooked up to the basement TV, wanna play something?"

Tubbo narrows his eyes. "I will defeat you in any game of your choosing," he threatens, and Purpled just grins at him. Ranboo hasn't said anything in a while, and Tubbo glances over at him worriedly. "You alright, bossman?"

Ranboo looks a little out of it, but he nods. Tommy just chalks it up to social anxiety. If Tommy's not exactly *comfortable* with how crowded and loud it is, he can't imagine it's much different for Ranboo. Well, maybe a little *less* loud, but still. As Purpled and Tubbo make their way out of the kitchen, Tommy goes to follow, only to have Ranboo grab his wrist to stop him.

There's something off about him, but Tommy's not sure if it's just a trick of the lighting that's making his eyes go all glassy. "Everything alright, big man?" Tommy asks, and Ranboo nods slowly, guiding Tommy over to the counter by the sink. He hovers a hand in front of the bottles for a second, then grabs one with bright red liquid and pours it into a cup, which he then shoves into Tommy's hands. "Oh, uh, I don't think we're supposed to have any of this stuff, Ranboo."

Ranboo just stands in front of him, eyes trained on the cup. "Drink," he says, and his voice sounds a little weird, but that could just be the music. Tommy tries to laugh it off and puts the cup down, but Ranboo grabs his hand and forces the cup back into it. "Drink it."

"Are you sure you're okay?" Tommy asks, trying to set the cup down for a second time, only to have Ranboo's grip tighten exponentially. "Ow! Fuck, man, let go!"

"It'll be good," Ranboo says, still sounding weird, "trust me. I'm your *friend*, Tommy."

Tommy narrows his eyes. "Are *you* drunk? Did you somehow get drunk when we weren't looking?" he jokes, and Ranboo just keeps staring at him. His eyes are weirdly hypnotic. "Seriously, are you feeling alright? I can take you home if you don't want to be here, it's not a big deal. I can text Tubbo, and we can just leave-"

"No!" Ranboo says, and Tommy blinks in surprise at how loud he's being. "Drink it."

"Alright, fuck's sakes," Tommy says, and he pretends to take a sip. Ranboo keeps staring at him, pointing at the cup. Tommy turns to leave the kitchen. "Ranboo, I'm not gonna drink it, seriously, it's not-"

Ranboo grabs him by the shoulders and he turns Tommy around so that he's blocking Tommy's way out of the kitchen. Why the fuck is he acting so weird?! "I just want you to have a good time," he says, and he *still* sounds weird. The Sense doesn't like this, but it's also clearly confused. This is Ranboo, someone he trusts, someone he *knows* would never do anything to hurt him, intentionally or not. Ranboo smiles. It looks artificial. "So drink!"

"I don't really want to," he says, mostly because he's terrified of Tubbo's wrath, and Ranboo's fake smile disappears. He looks quite sad, actually. Tommy really just wants to get down to the basement and watch Tubbo get utterly decimated in Mario Kart. "Alright, fine, but just a sip though. I don't want to get in trouble."

Ranboo grins. It's so unsettling. "Chug, chug, chug!" he cheers, and a good few people filter into the kitchen. Tommy's eyes go wide. Ranboo's eyes are still so glassy. The small crowd starts chanting with him, and Tommy's shoulders go up by his ears. Ranboo's grin looks so painfully fake that Tommy's half-tempted to shake him until he snaps out of whatever this is. "C'mon, Tommy, don't be a wuss!"

Well, Tommy's not one to be challenged.

Right?

He tosses back his head and tries to gulp down as much of the drink as he can. He chokes a little as he puts the cup back down and has to cough into his elbow, but the crowd cheers, and everyone starts to filter back out. "Are you happy now?" Tommy says, a bit strained because his throat is fucking burning, and Ranboo nods, the fake grin disappearing. "Whatever, man, let's just meet back up with Purpled and Tubbo."

Ranboo follows Tommy out into the hall, and Tommy starts to ask around for the basement, only to be pointed towards a rather obvious staircase. Ah. That's embarrassing. In any case, the two of them head down, and Tommy can already hear Tubbo's shouts of frustration, along with Mario Kart music. Rainbow Road, to be specific.

"Tommy, tell Purpled that the only reason he's winning is because he's got the homefield advantage!" Tubbo says, focused on the screen with one of the most determined expressions Tommy has ever seen, and Purpled huffs out a laugh.

"As if," he says, and Tommy looks around for Ranboo, who's suddenly nowhere to be found. For fuck's sake, he hadn't thought *he'd* be the one fussing over his friends tonight. "Where have you guys been? Where's Ranboo?"

Tommy just shakes his head and sits on the arm of the couch. There are some guys playing beer pong a little ways away. "Fuck if I know, man. He's actin' all weird," he says, and Tubbo pauses the game, glaring up at Tommy. "I didn't do anything! *He's* the one trying to—ugh, nevermind, just hurry up and lose so that I can take your controller."

Purpled snorts, and Tubbo elbows Tommy before letting the race resume. "I'm literally about to lap you right now, man," Purpled says, and Tubbo makes a face. Tommy stifles a burp; the alcohol's hitting the bottom of his stomach now, and it's fucking *weird*. He makes a face at the way it makes his gut churn. Purpled raises a brow at him. "You good?"

"Good enough to kick your ass," Tommy says as Purpled hits the finish line, and Tubbo scoffs as he just now starts his third lap. "Anyways, I'm pretty sure Ranboo's just hiding out somewhere in the house. If you've got any pets, he's probably holed up with them."

"We don't have any pets. Unless you count the raccoon that busts into our trash cans once every couple weeks," Purpled says.

Tubbo snorts. "I wouldn't put anything past him," he says, and Tommy chuckles. As he finishes the race and hands his controller over, he glares at Tommy. "Not a word about this, got it? And don't even *start* with-oh! Ranboo! Over here!"

Ranboo's still got that weird look on his face, but he gives them a nod of acknowledgement, lifting up two more cups. "Tommy! C'mere a sec!" he calls, and Tommy resists the urge to scream. He doesn't want Tubbo to know about the little incident in the kitchen, though, so he just hands the controller back and walks over to Ranboo.

"Tommy, I got you some more drinks!"

"I don't need anymore," Tommy says, shaking his head, and Ranboo's fake smile falls from his face again. "Seriously, what's up with you? Are you sure you don't want to just go home?"

"Didn't it taste good, though? I got you more of it," Ranboo says, completely ignoring him, and Tommy blinks. "Have some more!"

Well, honestly, now that the alcohol's settled, it's not half-bad. Tommy feels a little lighter, sure, but nothing's really *changed*. "Will you stop being weird if I do?" he asks, and Ranboo pauses before nodding, and Tommy takes one of the cups. Ranboo hands him the other one. "Two? Seriously? Are you fucking-ugh, fine."

He downs the two cups and makes a face. It still burns going down; it's not pleasant. Ranboo follows him back to the couch, and Tubbo happily hands over the controller to Tommy again, having set him up in the worst kart possible. Tommy glares at him, and Purpled snorts. They start the race, Ranboo sitting silently and stock-still on the floor next to the couch. He doesn't respond to any of them as they go through grand prix after grand prix while occasionally trading off controllers, only looking up occasionally at Tommy.

After Tubbo and Purpled end in first and third respectively at Sunshine Airport, Ranboo stands again and grabs Tommy's arm. His eyes still have that weird haze to them-they almost look purple in the light, but then again, the basement is lined with those weird little LED lights, and they're set to purple. It's probably just Tommy's imagination.

"Tommy, come with me to the kitchen," Ranboo says, and clearly he's not waiting for an answer, because he starts to yank Tommy forward. Tommy stumbles up the stairs behind him, Ranboo pulling him past drunk uni students, designated drivers, and one rather grumpy-looking cat on the landing.

"Slow down! Fuck's sakes, man," Tommy says, laughing a little, because even if Ranboo's acting weird, this is kind of fun. Running around, doing their own stupid bullshit, not having to worry about anything... it's nice. Ranboo ushers him into the kitchen and starts to sort through the bottles on the counter again. "Oh, uh, Ranboo, I don't know if that's... let's not have any more, alright, I'm all good on that front."

Ranboo turns to look at him. He blinks slowly. Like that cat from the stairs. Tommy snorts, and Ranboo nods. "You need more," he says, and he pours more of that red shit into a cup. Tommy groans and starts to walk out of the kitchen, only to have Ranboo grab his shoulder and dig his nails in. "Tommy. Drink it."

He sounds weird. Like it's not *him* saying it.

Tommy turns to face him. "I *won't*," he says firmly, and Ranboo stares at him, eyes narrowed just slightly. He's got the cup in his free hand. Tommy wrenches his shoulder free of Ranboo's grip, and his brows furrow. "The fuck's gotten into you, man? I don't want to drink anymore, I didn't even want to drink to begin with."

"Drink it," Ranboo says again. He sounds fucking robotic. The Sense thrums lazily at the back of his head. Well, at least Tommy knows which power of his is the first to go on the fritz when it comes to alcohol. Ranboo grabs Tommy's wrist and forces the cup into his hand. "Drink. I made it for *you*. You don't want to be *rude*, right? C'mon, Tommy. I'm your friend. Trust me."

"You're being weird and I really want to go back to the basement now," Tommy says, and Ranboo fucking *glares* at him. "Don't get all fuckin' huffy with me, man, I came here to hang out with you and Tubbo and Purpled, not to get fuckin' drunk at some party. Besides, Phil's gonna kill me if I come home wasted, alright? So fuck off with that."

Ranboo just keeps staring at him. This is getting freaky, but Ranboo's blocking his way out of the kitchen. With the way he's been acting tonight, Tommy's not even sure if he should try to push past him. "Hey! Party people in the kitchen!" Ranboo shouts suddenly, and it sounds unbelievably awkward coming from him- Tommy resists the urge to laugh. "Tell my friend here to loosen up a little and have a good time!"

The people in the kitchen giggle, a few of them cheering and whooping. Tommy groans and shifts the cup in his hand. He might as well just... get it over with. It's not like he hasn't already broken his promise to Tubbo. "Alright! Fine, but this is it," he says, and Ranboo nods easily, stepping back. Tommy downs the red shit, and he winces. Does it ever stop burning? It's not like he *wants* to get used to it, and he's not entirely sure if this is a spider-biology thing or a normal-person thing. Slamming the cup down on the counter, Tommy looks up at Ranboo. "Are you happy now? Can we get back down to the basement?"

Ranboo nods again, and Tommy leads the way back to the staircase. Thankfully, Tubbo and Purpled are still playing Mario Kart- they've moved onto Twisted Mansion now- and Tommy settles down on the last free spot on the sofa. Ranboo goes back to sitting on the floor; serves him right for being such a fucking nutter all night.

Unfortunately, the alcohol's starting to do more than just make him feel a little buzzed. Tommy had honestly been counting on his metabolism for this one, but he's never looked up the effects of alcohol on spider biology, so he's got no clue how this is going to go. He just hopes he can keep whatever other effects result from it hidden from Tubbo.

Ranboo slumps a little against the sofa, then abruptly shoots upright. "Wh-! Where...? Weren't we just in the kitchen?" he asks, sounding like he's just woken up, and Tommy gives him a worried glance. "I don't-sorry, I must've... zoned out or something."

That's not good. "Don't you remember our conversations?" Tommy asks, and Ranboo looks at him like he's crazy. "Y'know, like in the kitchen a while ago, and then just now. You *don't*? Are you joking?"

Ranboo shakes his head, and he blinks. "I'm fine," he mutters as Tubbo goes to sit next to him, but Tubbo's not hearing it. He perks up at the sound of Moo Moo Meadows, though, and he grins. It's a real one this time; he looks much more alive. Tommy giggles, and Ranboo leans forward a little. "Oh, hey, are you guys playing Mario Kart?"

"Yeah, bossman, you've been watching us play," Tubbo says, and oh, right, they're concerned about Ranboo right now. Ranboo's brows furrow, and Purpled pauses the game. He's also worried, which is weird, considering Tommy had been, like, ninety-three percent sure Purpled can't stand him. Tubbo glares over at Purpled. "What did you do?!"

"I've been with *you* the whole time, moron, ask Tommy what *he* did," Purpled says, and Tommy snorts, trying his hardest not to laugh. He hadn't done anything! Well, he *had*, but he hadn't done anything to *Ranboo*. Purpled blinks at him. "Dude, are you- did you drink something?"

Tommy blinks. "No, I haven't," he lies, giggling as though it's the funniest thing he's ever heard, which it is, because he has, and they all have no idea. Purpled gives him a wary look, but he nods. Hah! Tommy's still a great liar, even if he's a *wee* bit tipsy. Tubbo turns his glare towards Tommy, though, so maybe he's not *that* great a liar. "I *haven't*, Tubbo."

Ranboo raises a brow. "Really? Because you're giggling. I've literally never heard you *giggle* before, Tommy," he says, and Tommy chokes back a laugh. The word 'giggle' is quite funny, innit? Ranboo and Tubbo exchange a look. "Yeah, he's definitely had a few."

"Wha-! *You're* the one who gave me four fuckin' cups of that nasty red shit," Tommy says, pointing a finger between Ranboo's brows, and Ranboo swats his hand away, very confused and clearly in need of an explanation. Tommy stifles another laugh. "You look so fuckin' stupid right now, big man."

Tubbo gives him a withering glare, but Tommy thinks he looks quite funny with his face all scrunched up like that. "You. In the bathroom. *Now*," Tubbo tells him, yanking him by the bicep towards the bathroom at the other end of the basement. Tommy snorts, giggling as Tubbo shoves him towards the tub and shuts the door. "What the fuck were you *thinking?*!"

Leaning back and stumbling to catch himself on the shower wall, Tommy makes what he hopes is a dismissive expression and goes *pshhh*. "I haven't been drinking, Tubbo, that's absurd," he says, and Tubbo stands over him, arms crossed. He looks very unamused. Tommy tries hard not to laugh as he sits down in the bottom of the tub, legs hanging over the edge. "Okay, *maybe* Ranboo gave me a bunch of the red stuff, and *maybe* I drank it 'cuz he was *really* insit-instis-annoying about it."

Tubbo opens up the linen closet and starts to sift through it. "That doesn't sound like Ranboo at all. What it sounds like to *me* is that you somehow got your hands on alcohol and decided to say 'fuck it' and drink it. For whatever *ungodly* reason, because I know for a *fact* that I warned you not to," Tubbo grumbles, running a washcloth under the cold tap. "We have no *idea* what it's going to do to you! This is such a dumb fucking decision, even for *you*! I don't know why

I'm surprised. I *knew* coming to this party was a bad idea!"

"Tubbo, you are talking a *whole* lot and if I'm bein' honest, I'm not taking much of it in," Tommy says, grinning, and Tubbo shakes his head. His arms start to pulse, and he frowns as Tubbo makes his way over with the cold washcloth. He tries to put it on Tommy's forehead, but Tommy swats him away. "Fuck off! My arms hurt, don't-no, Tubs, don't, I'm fuckin'-my arms hurt so bad, Tubbo, like, so so bad."

Scoffing, Tubbo grabs his arm. "Oh, come *on*, you big baby, it can't be that ba-holy *fuck!*" he shouts, abruptly dropping his hold, and Tommy's arm bangs against the tub. He whines, and Tubbo's panicking suddenly intensifies. "Tommy, you have to fire off your webs *now*. Like, as much as you fucking can, okay?"

"Why? Fuck's goin' on?" Tommy asks, lifting his arm clumsily up to his face. Oh. That's what's wrong. The veins in his forearm are swollen and pulsing, and the skin around the hole in his wrist-that's where the webs come from, he remembers-is *really* inflamed.

"Tubbo, am I gonna die?!"

"You're not going to die," Tubbo tells him, grabbing a basket of towels from the linen closet and dumping out all the towels onto the floor. "Start firing webs off in here, I'm gonna google the effects of alcohol on spiders. Oh, lovely, just got a text from Purpled saying the shit you drank is really intense liquor."

Tommy's jaw drops. "Oh, okay! Is that bad? Am I a spider? Why've I got webs? Hah! Right, the Spider-Man thing, I almost forgot," he chuckles, and he struggles to sit up in the tub, putting the basket in his lap and rolling up his sleeves even further. Tubbo is furiously tapping away at his phone, and Tommy flicks both wrists repeatedly towards the bucket. "Gettin' rid of the webs, buddy, don't even worry about it!"

Glancing over, Tubbo makes a face. "It's so weird when you're not in the suit," he mutters, turning back to his phone. After about ten minutes, he speaks up again. "Alright, well, google says that spiders spin their webs more erratically when they're drunk. Also, apparently your webs right now are shit quality, but you're making a ton of it, so

you're pretty much just spewing out the equivalent of spider vomit."

Eyes wide, Tommy huffs out an astonished breath. "I'm *spider-vomiting*? That's so fucking cool!" he whisper-yells, and Tubbo sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose between his fingers. At that, Tommy starts giggling again. "You look like my *dad*."

Tubbo groans. "Oh, fuck, we're gonna have to tell Phil," he mumbles, pressing the washcloth to Tommy's forehead.

With a gasp, Tommy stops expelling his webs and grabs Tubbo by the shoulders. "You know Phil?!" he asks, and Tubbo hangs his head in frustration. He starts to pat Tommy's face with the washcloth, and Tommy tries to bat his hands away. "S'cold! Fuck off!"

"I have to sober you up *somewhat*, prick, now stay still!" Tubbo huffs, and Tommy whines, continuing to put more webbing in the basket. This is much less fun than talking about his cool spider superpowers. "Can you stand and walk?"

"Pfft, of course I can! I'm *so* sober," he says, and Tubbo rolls his eyes as he winds an arm around Tommy's middle and helps him up, propping him up against the wall. Tubbo takes off his jacket and puts it overtop of the basket, tucking it under his arm before rewrapping his arm around Tommy again. "Tubbo, you are *such* a good friend, even if your nightmare hallucination twin is the meanest in the world..."

Tubbo gives him a bewildered look as he leads Tommy out of the bathroom. "My nightmare *what* now?" he asks, and as Tommy goes to explain, he shakes his head. Tubbo whistles loudly, and Ranboo and Purpled look up from their Mario Kart race. "We're gonna head out, he's shitfaced! See you!"

Purpled snorts and turns back to the game, and Ranboo looks rather concerned, but Tubbo just shakes his head again. Tommy leans into him as they head up the stairs. "You're freakishly strong, Tubs. I'm, like, a bajillion pounds with all my superpowers," he says, and Tubbo shushes him as he navigates through the halls and out of the house. "Tubbo! I don't wanna go home! S'too long of a walk!"

"You're a moron and I'm taking you to your house so that Puffy doesn't have my head on a platter tomorrow. I don't want to get in trouble for leaving you at a party, so you're going home. End of story," Tubbo tells him, and Tommy pouts as they start making their way down the street. Ah, this looks familiar! Does Purpled live near them? Huh. Tommy should probably start trying to be a better friend. Tubbo clears his throat. "When you said Ranboo was the one who gave you the drink, you were lying, right? You just drank on your own?"

Tommy shakes his head as they turn down his street. "Mmh, no... he-Ranboob was-he gave me the red stuff, remember? Oh! You weren't there, I forgot," he says, dissolving into giggles, and Tubbo just sighs. "No! I'm-m'serious, Big T, he was all like 'Drink it!' and I was tellin' him no, 'cuz I knew you'd get *mad* at me. No... you *are* mad at me!"

Tubbo gives him a wary look, but he smiles nonetheless as they walk up the driveway. The porch light abruptly turns on. "I'm not mad at you. Well, scratch that, I'm *kind of* mad. But you seem to be metabolizing the alcohol pretty fast, which is good. This seems like the peak of drunkenness, and you've only been drunk for, like, an hour and a half," he says, and they get to the door, but Tommy doesn't have his keys. He must've forgotten to bring them to the party! Tubbo glares at him as he knocks on the door, and Tommy gives him a sheepish grin. Phil opens the door, eyes wide as soon as he looks at Tommy. Tubbo winces. "Hey, Phil... bad news."

"Psst! Don't tell him I'm drunk," Tommy whispers, though judging by Phil's face, he seems to have heard him anyway. Aw, damn, Tommy had taken care to be quiet about it and everything, that sucks. "Hello, Dad! I've had a *lovely* night with my very respins-responsible friends, and I would like to have a nap now."

Phil crosses one arm over his chest, his other hand cupped over his mouth. "How the fuck has this happened?" he asks, and Tubbo just shrugs helplessly. "Tommy, I thought you said you were going to see a midnight premiere with Ranboo and Tubbo, where the hell did you get *alcohol*?!"

"It was a party! I lied t'you, that's my bad," Tommy says. "I wasn't

gonna drink, but then poof! I had a drink in my hand and everyone was all like 'Chug! Chug! Chug!' so I had it! It was *real* nasty, Dad, like you wouldn't *believe*. An' then Tubbo took me into the bathroom and I did the-what did you call it, Tubs? I did the whole vomit thing, Phil, it was *nasty*. So much vomit like you wouldn't *believe*."

Of course, he's referring to his web-vomit-whatever, but he's *pretty* sure Phil's not supposed to know about Spider-Man, so Tommy's keeping that a secret. "I'll get him to bed. Thanks for bringing him home, Tubbo," Phil says, and Tubbo nods, handing Tommy off to him. Tommy whines, because now his side's all cold, and he *hates* the cold. Phil brings him into the hall and shuts the door behind them, and oh! The cold's gone now, for the most part. "Mate, what were you *thinking*? No, you know what? I'll save this for tomorrow, you're not gonna remember any of this shit. Upstairs you go, c'mon then."

Tommy makes a face at him and grabs the banister, stumbling up the steps. Phil sighs and wraps one of Tommy's arms around his shoulders, guiding him up. "Thanks, Dadza," Tommy mumbles, and he trips over his own feet into Wilbur's door with a *thud*. He snorts and starts to giggle as Phil pulls him away and in the direction of Tommy's room. "And don't worry, you don't have to lecture me or some shit, I have *learned* my lesson! Be more discreet!"

"That's not... whatever you say, Toms. Go on, into bed with you," Phil says softly, and Tommy squints at his bed before crawling under the covers. It's quite warm, actually. Really cozy. He could fall asleep right now. Phil brushes some hair away from Tommy's forehead. "Sleep it off, mate. I'll scold you in the morning."

He gives Tommy's shoulder a pat and turns the lights off. Tommy passes the fuck out almost immediately after.

Oh, *shit*. His head is fucking *pounding*.

"Good mornin'," Techno says, and Tommy lets out a low whine at how fucking *loud* he's being, even if the words seem like they've been whispered. "Ah, good to know a hangover makes your senses

go on high alert. You oughta get downstairs, Phil's waiting with breakfast and a lecture."

"Downstairs is the last place I want to be," Tommy mutters, but he drags himself out of bed anyway. Apparently, he's still in his clothes from yesterday, coat and all, so he ushers Techno out. "I'm gonna change, go fuck off and die or something."

Techno chuckles as he leaves, and Tommy changes into an outfit in which he can wallow in shame comfortably. He throws the hood of his sweatshirt up in an attempt to at least block out *some* of the light and noise, and he slips into the hallway and down the stairs, ignoring Wilbur's curious look as he slips into a chair at the kitchen table.

Phil sets down a plate in front of him. "I'm sure I don't have to tell you that it was a stupid thing to do, your little hangover's probably reminder enough," he says, far too loud, and Wilbur gasps in delight. Sadistic bastard, he's just happy that Tommy's in trouble. Phil points a threatening finger at Wilbur, and he immediately refocuses his attention to his plate, though he still glances up every so often. "I hope I don't have to explain what alcohol can do to a developing brain."

"You don't, I know, it's bad. I was dumb," Tommy says flatly, taking a piece of bacon and nibbling on it. "Keep it down a little, please? My head is fuckin' killing me..."

"That's what we call a natural consequence," Wilbur says smugly, and Phil gives him an actual glare this time. He swallows, and Tommy stifles a laugh. "Right, sorry, this is serious. I'll shut up, you can act like I'm not even here."

Sighing, Phil sits down across from Tommy and slides a massive glass of water towards him, as well as some painkillers. "Take them and drink up. It'll help with the hangover," he says, and Tommy nods in thanks, downing the pills with a healthy amount of water. Phil looks disappointed. That's the literal *worst*. "I just don't understand where this came from, Tommy, I thought... no, I *know* you're more responsible than that."

Tommy scrubs his hands over his face. "I know, I know, I'm just... there was a lot of *pressure*, and I didn't know what to do," he mutters, because it's partially the truth. Tommy's not about to snitch on Ranboo, because whatever had been going on with him at the party had *clearly* not been normal. "It's not gonna happen again, Phil, I made a mistake."

"I should *hope* it doesn't happen again, for your sake," Phil says, and Tommy nods. "Your birthday's in just a few months, mate. If you want to get shitfaced, do it *legally*, and do it somewhere *safe*. What if you had needed us? What if you'd lost your phone and you couldn't contact us? We wouldn't have known where you were. That's *dangerous*, Tommy."

"I know that! I didn't even *want* to drink, Phil!" Tommy snaps, and he takes another few sips of water. Phil's brows furrow, and Tommy sighs. "I was just going there to hang out with a kid from my class. Tubbo and Ranboo were there too, and none of them got drunk, because that *wasn't why we went*. We were just gonna play Mario Kart in the basement until the party was over, I *swear*. I... I didn't *want* to drink, Dad, I hated it so *much*."

Phil's eyes search his face for something, and evidently, he's found it, because the parental disappointment is quickly replaced with sympathy. "I know you've got a temper like a bomb fuse, but you can't let people egg you on into doing things you don't want to do," he says, and Tommy nods. Phil puts a hand on his shoulder. "You're a good kid, Tommy, and you're better than that. I just want you safe."

"I know," Tommy says, and his voice is all trembly. Probably for the same reason why his lip is quivering and his vision's starting to blur at the corners. "I'm sorry, Phil."

Phil pulls his chair around and puts an arm around Tommy's shoulders. "You better be, because I don't *ever* want to hear about how much you vomited ever again," he jokes, and Tommy laughs a little. Phil gives his shoulder a squeeze, and Wilbur reaches across the table to give his hand a pat. "Is the hangover punishment enough, or do I need to ground you?"

"I will not be touching any alcohol ever until I'm as much of a fossil as you are," Tommy answers, and Phil snorts. "Hangover's more than enough."

"Glad to hear it," Phil says, and Tommy nods, rubbing at his eyes with the heels of his palms until he sees those little light spots. Some of them are purple. Phil passes him a cup of coffee and slides into his usual seat. "You should head over to Puffy's and thank Tubbo for taking your ass back here, mate."

Oh, *fuck*, Tommy's gotta tell Tubbo what actually happened.

While he's vaguely certain he'd explained it somewhat on his drunken walk back home, Tommy's also pretty sure that he'd left out some pretty big details. "Uh, yeah, I'll head over there when I'm done with breakfast," Tommy says, and Phil nods.

Wilbur nudges his side. "Hey, did you want a ride?" he asks, and Tommy squints at him. Wilbur puts his hands up placatingly. "I can't imagine it'll be very fun to walk in the cold while you're still hungover."

"Fine. But hurry up," Tommy tells him, chugging the coffee and scarfing down breakfast. Phil's cooking has slightly improved; he's even used some salt this time. Wilbur stares at him like he's grown three heads. "Fuck are you looking at?"

"Nothing! Nothing, I'm just surprised you're able to stomach anything, especially so early in the morning," Wilbur says, and Tommy rolls his eyes. Of *course* he's starving, he'd done the equivalent of spider-vomiting yesterday and his veins had been all swollen and-

Well *now* he's nauseous.

God, he really should get to Tubbo's. The sooner he can stop thinking about yesterday, the better, if you ask him. "I'm gonna drive Jubilee there myself if you're not out in five," Tommy threatens over his shoulder as he leaves the kitchen. He pulls on his trainers and snatches Wilbur's keys from the bowl.

Thankfully, Wilbur's got the sense not to let Tommy drive, because he's not far behind. He wrestles his keys from Tommy's hand and huffs as he leads the way to the car. "Don't vomit in my car, or so help me, God," he says, and Tommy grins at him as he pulls his seatbelt on.

"I make no promises," he says, and Wilbur sighs.

Tommy's not expecting to see Puffy when the door finally opens, but it's not unwelcome.

She's got her pyjamas on still, and Tommy feels a bit bad for presumably having woken her up, especially when he's not even here to see her. "Tommy? You're never over here so early, everything okay?" she asks, and Tommy smiles at her.

"Uh, yeah, it's all good, I'm just here to see Tubbo," he says, and Puffy nods easily, ruffling his hair as she lets him in. She nudges him towards the kitchen, and while Tommy's half-tempted to protest, he's not about to deny himself another cup of coffee, which Puffy promptly presses into his hands. Tommy takes a sip and hums. Good shit. "Is he up yet?"

"No idea, but he's probably gonna come down soon. I'm making pancakes, you want any?" she asks, and Tommy nods. Puffy grins at him and hands him the platter of them, turning back to the griddle and flipping the half-finished ones. "I haven't seen you in a while, kiddo! We've missed you, y'know."

Tommy chuckles quietly. "Yeah, I've been a bit busy," he says, and if that isn't the understatement of the century, he doesn't know what is. He starts in on the pancakes, and Puffy yawns. "How've you been, Puffy?"

"It's been... stressful lately," she says, "but I'm alright."

Tommy's brow furrows, but before he can ask anything further, there's yelling from upstairs, and he grins. "Puffy! Is Tommy here?" Tubbo shouts, and Puffy rolls her eyes.

"Yeah! Now get down here and have some pancakes!" she calls back, and Tubbo starts to thump loudly down the steps. Tommy snorts as he hears Tubbo stumble on the last few. Puffy beams in the direction of the doorway, and Tommy glances over his shoulder to see Tubbo, looking like he's just fallen out of bed. He might've. "Good morning, kiddo!"

Tubbo gives her a nod and a tired smile, and he yanks Tommy by the sleeve. "We'll be back down in a bit, Tommy just has to *explain* something," he says, and Puffy looks a little surprised, but she nods, and Tubbo practically frog-marches Tommy upstairs. Tubbo shuts the door to his room behind them and crosses his arms. "Now that you're sober, can I get an explanation?"

"Right, right, that's actually what I came here to tell you. I'm worried about Ranboo," Tommy tells him, fidgeting. Tubbo's brows furrow, and Tommy sighs. "Listen, I'm not about to pin the blame on him, because I *did* drink, but... he was acting really fuckin' weird last night, man. He stopped me in the kitchen, right when you and Purpled left, right? So I ask him what's up, and he hands me a cup of that red shit. Then, when I go to tell him I'm not gonna drink it, because I *wasn't* gonna drink, he gets all weird and shit."

"What d'you mean by weird?" Tubbo asks, arms crossed. But not like he's mad, more like he's intrigued. Tommy struggles to find an explanation, and thankfully, Tubbo seems to sense that. "What was off about him? Did someone slip him something when we weren't looking?"

Tommy shakes his head. "No, no, that's not it. He was... there was something about his eyes, they looked glassy, o-or cloudy, it was like he wasn't really *there*, y'know? And when I told him I didn't want it, he got really pushy, which isn't like him!" he says, and Tubbo nods. "So he keeps pushing and pushing and then he gets *other* people in on it, and now I'm stuck in the kitchen with Ranboo and all these drunk morons telling me to chug, and I just wanted to get down to the basement, and-"

"Okay, okay, chill out a second," Tubbo tells him, and Tommy's surprised to find that his hands had started shaking while he'd been talking. Tubbo sits him down on the bed and hands him an

unopened water bottle. "I keep these in here in case you come over after patrol. Just have it, take a few deep breaths. Calm yourself, it's fine."

Tommy nods and has a few sips of water. "So I had it, just to get him off my back. Which was stupid, I know, but... it was like I was talking to a *stranger*, Tubbo," he says, and Tubbo nods, though he still looks confused. "And then, when we finally *did* go to the basement, he called me over-he was still *weird*, I'm telling you, it's like he wasn't all there-and that's when he gave me two more. And *then*, after you and Purpled went through a bunch of courses, he made me go back to the kitchen with him and pressured me into another one, man, it was so fucking unsettling! But it's not like him at *all*, Ranboo would never intentionally make me that fucking uncomfortable."

Nodding, Tubbo turns on his PC and starts to get to searching. "I'm looking for party drugs that might've done something to him, but none of these sound like what you're describing," he says after a while, and Tommy bites his nails idly. Just to have something to do with his hands. Tubbo frowns. "Tommy, are you absolutely *sure* of what you saw?"

"Yeah, man! I'm not fuckin' lying or some shit to shift any of the blame, I *swear*. I wouldn't have had anything to drink if he wasn't being so weirdly insistent!" he says, and Tubbo gives him a wary look. Tommy scoffs. "Fuck's sakes, you don't believe me! Look, I'm not gonna act like he poured it down my throat, but I *will* say that it looked like he was considering it the fourth time I told him I wasn't going to have any. I fucked up, alright? I *know* that. But I'm not trying to shift any of the blame to Ranboo, I'm telling you there's something *wrong*. The Sense went off about it!"

"Well, why didn't you just say *that*? I trust that instinct of yours more than I trust myself," Tubbo says, and The Sense chirps. Tommy thinks it should shut the fuck up. The Sense is offended by this thought. Tubbo runs a hand through his hair. "I mean... he *did* have that lapse in memory, which was odd..."

Tommy snaps his fingers. "Yeah! See?! I *told* you, there's something weird going on with him! It's as though he didn't remember doing

any of what he did before he snapped out of it, which wouldn't have happened quick if he was drugged or some shit, right?" he asks, and Tubbo nods, arms crossed and brows furrowed in confusion. Tommy's shoulders fall a little. "What should we do?"

"I mean, there's really nothing we *can* do unless he tells us what's going on with him, but remembering his reaction, I don't think he even knows," Tubbo mutters. "I'll ask him. I don't think anything'll come of it, but it can't hurt to ask."

"Right," Tommy says. "We'll just have to roll with it. We'll keep him safe."

"We will," Tubbo tells him firmly, "I promise."

Woohoo! That was a bit of a longer chapter, hope you guys liked it!

What's up with Ranboo? Hmm, I wonder ;)

bullets and blueprints

Chapter 38: bullets and blueprints

After another fight with Automata, Blaze, and 404, Tommy gets patched up by Techno and spends some time with Phil.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Tommy is currently dodging several drones.

As it turns out, 404 hasn't developed any new spores, so Tommy's gas mask is still working, but he *is* using the spore clouds to obscure Tommy's vision, which means Tommy is currently relying on The Sense to get him through this fight. It feels like every time he knocks one drone out of the way, another decides to shoot at him. So far, he hasn't been shot, but he's not holding his breath.

Knocking yet another drone to the ground and stomping on it, Tommy fires off a web and tugs himself out of the cloud of spores. He whips around once he's out of it and aims a kick towards Blaze, who jumps out of the way. He's gotten a wardrobe upgrade too, as it seems, given that he looks like the personification of a volcano.

Tommy thinks that Blaze's dark and fiery costume clashes terribly with 404's cottagecore theming, but he's not about to say anything about it. He'll just continue to let them look stupid as fuck.

Twitter will surely do the mocking on his behalf.

"Get over here!" Blaze snarls, directing more drones towards him—with just his hand, which is only slightly impressive after having seen Automata in action—and 404 fires off another blast of spores.

"Who d'you think you are, fuckin' *Scorpion* or some shit?" Tommy scoffs as he punches through a drone. He winces at the sparking ends of the wires, but he pulls it off his wrist and throws it like a frisbee at the other drone, sending them both careening into the side of a car. Tommy sucks in a breath through his teeth and grimaces. "Ooh, yikes, hope they've got insurance."

The ass end of 404's spore gun comes down on his arm, and Tommy grabs him by the shoulder, kneeing his stomach. "Oh, you little *shit*," he snarls, taking Tommy by *both* shoulders and driving him-heh, driving-into the aforementioned car. "Blaze! Now!"

"No thanks!" Tommy squeaks, ducking down and tackling 404 by the legs into the asphalt. He rolls away and hurries to stand as he fires webs desperately at the incoming drones. Webbing them up is enough to throw them off their course, which usually sends them spiraling into each other. Tommy likes to watch them explode when he's not too busy with punching Blaze in the jaw. Now that he's done that, he grabs Blaze by his dumb-looking jacket and rolls his shoulder, ready to web him up and leave him for the cops to deal with. "Alright, fellas, not to wrap this up too early, but I've got a biology test to be studying for, so I'm gonna-"

A car slams into his side, and Tommy skids down half the fucking street before he manages to heave the car off of him. It's not being driven by anyone, which means...

Oh, *fuck*.

"You two can't even handle twenty minutes on your own," Automata says, shaking his head almost... fondly? Tommy groans and leans with one hand on the hood of the car that Automata had just thrown at him. Fucking *bastard*. This is the second time he's appeared publicly-at all, really-and he's already throwing *cars*?! That's not how this goes. The way this *goes* is that the villains and Tommy have an elaborate little dance where they test the limits and throw insults, not push the limits to the brink and throw *cars*. Automata brings his hands together, and the doors of nearby cars start to wrench off and float in a neat circle around him. "I *do* apologize for this, Spider-Man, but we have to get going. Surely you understand."

Tommy just sighs and dodges the car doors as they come, gaining ground when he can. A few of the more jagged edges leave him with a couple of cuts, but Tommy dives at Automata anyway, only slightly surprised to immediately be tossed aside. "I am going to put you behind bars," he huffs, jumping out of the way of another *entire fucking car* as Automata throws it at him. Blaze runs over to 404's unconscious form-Tommy must've knocked him out when they'd hit the pavement-and Tommy groans in frustration. "Oh *no* you don't-! Hey!"

His path is immediately blocked by a thick wall of those fucking car doors, and he turns back towards Automata, who swoops forward with almost superhuman speed and grabs Tommy's injured arm. One of the copper bits detaches from his gloved finger and sweeps *into* the cut. Tommy gags. Automata tilts his head.

"Fascinating," he says, sounding astonished, and Tommy raises his leg up to kick Automata in the chest, forcibly separating the two of them. The cut in his arm stings, especially after having been *violated*, and Tommy raises his fists up, ready to fight. Automata simply raises a hand, though there's nothing to dodge. "No need. I'll be going now."

"Uh, no you will *not*," Tommy says, firing a few webs in his direction, and Automata dodges them almost effortlessly. As infuriating as fighting this guy might be, Tommy's gotta admit that he's pretty cool. Automata raises up a few scraps of metal and, with a flourish of his hand, sends them in Tommy's direction. Tommy ducks out of the way and leaps at Automata, one fist raised, only to be tossed aside by a car door. As Tommy struggles to stand again, Automata tilts his stupid head. "So, is that just... a *thing* you can do? Like, telepathically? Or is it all machines?"

Automata chuckles. It's so unsettling. "Such a curious kid, aren't you? This is gonna be *fun*," he says, and Tommy makes a face. What the fuck is *that* supposed to mean? Tommy moves as if he's about to throw a punch, Automata moves to block it, and Tommy lands an actual blow to Automata's ribs. Automata stumbles back and nods. Tommy's not entirely sure how to take that. "Oh. You're smart. That's good. As a reward for such a clever little maneuver, I'll tell you."

“As a *reward*? Fuck d’you mean?” Tommy asks, utterly fucking baffled, because what supervillain in their right *mind* explains their evil powers as a *reward*?

Automata raises both hands, and the car doors that had previously been shielding Blaze and 404 come away to reveal that they’ve escaped. Shit. The doors circle around Automata. “Each of my fingers has a receptor that allows me to manipulate the electromagnetic field of one moderately sized object and make it move around, as long as it’s of a reasonable weight and consists mostly of metal. I can move ten at a time,” he says, and he tosses the car doors at Tommy, who desperately dodges them, “or just one.”

He gestures with both hands, and yet another fucking car rams into Tommy at an unreasonable speed. Tommy’s crushed between the car and the brick wall of a building, and he shoves it off of him, chest heaving as he attempts to catch his breath. “I am getting *very* tired of being hit by cars!” he bellows, only to be slammed abruptly into the same wall by-you guessed it-another car.

Automata chuckles again. “Sorry, couldn’t resist,” he says, not sounding very sorry at all, and Tommy struggles to push the car off. This is annoying as hell. Tommy falls to the ground and pushes himself up with shaking arms, eyes narrowed at Automata, who just continues to look down at him with that stupid smile on his screen. “Well, I think that’ll slow you down enough. I can’t wait for our next meeting, Spider-Man.”

As Automata walks away, Tommy stumbles after him. “I don’t-you’re not getting away,” he pants, even though Automata is already too far to hear him. He fires off a web, but it barely goes three meters. Shit. Automata’s gone. “Fuck... not again...”

“Get home so that Techno can fix your wounds, please, I can’t have you dying,” Tubbo says, clearly worried, and Tommy grunts. This is so fucking dumb. *“Also, I’m pretty sure the girl in that shop is running out to check the damages-”*

“My storefront!” someone shouts, and sure enough, there’s the cashier from the ice cream place, hands on her face in disbelief. She

turns to Tommy and points at him. "You! You and those *freaks*! Oh. Oh, you are... really injured."

Tommy nods, leaning on the overturned car and wincing. "Yeah, I'm a little out of sorts, I'll help you clean up in a minute, let me just reset my ribs," he says, and the girl shakes her head, hands out in a placating manner.

"Uh, no, no, you go ahead and... don't worry about it," she says, and Tommy presses a hand to his side and *pushes* until his ribs feel like they're in the right place again.

He coughs and stands up straight, still grimacing. "Here, did you want me to start moving debris, or should I help with the broken glass?" he asks, and she stares at him like he's crazy. In all fairness, Tommy probably looks a mess, having just been hit by multiple cars.

"Go home, man," she says, blinking, and Tommy blinks right back at her. "You're bleeding everywhere, like, seriously."

Ah. That's true. Blood still steadily oozes from the gash in his arm, and Tommy's pretty sure he's bruised in multiple places. "Sorry about your storefront," he says, and she waves him off. Tommy fires a web off at a nearby building and swings away, trying his best to ignore the twinge of pain that shoots up his side whenever he outstretches his arms. "I'm headed home, Tubbo, don't worry."

"*Good. Stop getting hurt, please,*" Tubbo says, quiet, and Tommy sighs. He can't exactly help it if a bunch of morons in ridiculous outfits want to beat the shit out of him. "*Techno doesn't have class today, right?*"

"He had two this morning, but he should be home by now," Tommy answers, slightly strained as he drops down into his usual alleyway. Tubbo hums, and Tommy sheds his hoodie, tucking it carefully into the bag beside Henry. The Sense tingles at the back of his head, and Tommy picks Henry up, frowning. "Someone's gone and touched Henry."

"*Tommy, I know you care very deeply about Henry, but that is not nearly as important as your injuries right now,*" Tubbo reminds him,

and Tommy nods, putting Henry back in the bag and changing into civilian clothes. He'll worry about it later.

He limps back to the house, clutching his arm, and sneaks upstairs to Techno's room to knock on the door. "I swear to God, if this isn't an emergency, I'm gonna-" Techno abruptly goes silent as soon as the door is opened and he takes one look at Tommy's face. Serves the bastard right, Tommy's been through a lot of shit today. Techno ushers him in, one hand between his shoulders. "Get in, get in, sit down."

Tommy sits on the bed and takes his jumper off, wincing as the fabric peels away from the myriad of cuts, scrapes, and bruises on his torso. Techno makes a face, but he pulls out the first aid kit anyway and holds up a finger as he leaves the room. He's probably getting a washcloth to scrub the dried blood off. Tommy glances over at Techno's desk, smiling at the myriad of papers and textbooks scattered across it.

As put-together as Techno likes to make himself seem, he's a bit of a frazzled mess when it comes to his university shit. Tommy's the same way, honestly. He wonders if Techno had always been like this, or if it's just a recent development. Maybe they'd both been just as messy for just as long. Maybe Techno's just like him, maybe they've always had things in common and just never got around to spending enough time together to know it.

Tommy's smile fades as he remembers what Hallucination-Techno had said.

*"You're **still** not worth it."*

Tommy shudders.

The door creaks open again. "Alright, wipe yourself down with this, and then I'll-why are you crying?" Techno asks, looking rather alarmed as he stands there, damp washcloth outstretched towards Tommy. Tommy lifts one hand up to his face to wipe a tear from his cheek, a little surprised. He hadn't even realized he'd been crying. Techno's shoulders hunch up by his ears. "I'm gonna warn you now, I'm *really* not good at comfortin' people."

Tommy laughs. "I know that, dumbass," he says, wiping away more tears with the back of his hand. He takes the washcloth from Techno and scrubs away the dried blood on his torso and around the cut on his arm. It oozes more blood, a steady dribbling flow that moves in a line towards his wrist. "Can you please just... can you help me?"

"Uh, yeah, kid, I can-I'll help," Techno says, still sounding uneasy, and Tommy offers his arm up first. It's the worst of the cuts, and it's probably deep enough to need a few stitches. Techno clears his throat and takes some peroxide and a few cotton balls from the first aid kit, wincing preemptively. "This is gonna hurt. A lot."

"Can't be any worse than what I've already fuckin' gone through today," Tommy mutters, squeezing his eyes shut as Techno disinfects the cut. It stings. At Techno's inquisitive look, though, Tommy sighs and shakes his head. "That TV-headed bitch threw *four cars* at me, Techno. Four! He's fuckin' insane, man!"

Techno blinks as his movements pause. Tommy probably shouldn't have said anything, now all Techno's going to do is fret over him. "You... you got hit by four cars?" he asks, sounding winded, and Tommy scoffs.

"No, I only got hit by three of them. I dodged the second one," Tommy mutters, and Techno just sits there dumbly. The sluggish blood starts to flow onto Techno's hand. "Oi, dickhead, I'm bleeding on you. Hurry and patch me up."

Snapping out of whatever thoughts he'd been having, Techno wipes his hand off with the washcloth and grabs the needle and surgical thread. Tommy hates this part. "So you're tellin' me this guy threw four cars at you?" he asks as he puts numbing cream on Tommy's arm. It's not going to do anything to rid him of the pain, but Tommy appreciates the gesture.

As the needle pierces Tommy's skin, he nods with a wince. "Yeah, and then he did this weird thing where he dipped his finger cap thingy into my cut. It was gross," he says, and Techno stares at him. "Yeah, man, I'm telling you, this fucker's creepy as shit!"

Techno shakes his head in disbelief. "No, I believe you, I... the shit

you're going through..." he trails off, finishing up the stitches, and Tommy's brow furrows. Techno puts a hand on his shoulder and looks down at the way the bruises and scrapes and cuts mar his torso. Techno looks as though he's about to cry. Tommy's never seen him like this before. Techno takes a shaky breath and smiles weakly, like he's trying to convince Tommy that he's fine. "Here, let me get the smaller ones. I've got you, Toms."

Tommy's eyes go wide, and the tears start up all over again. All at once, his emotions come crashing down on him like a tidal wave; the physical pain, the fear, the stress, the panic that overwhelms him, all of it washes over him. And he looks at Techno, who had just said the simplest, most comforting thing Tommy's ever heard. He dives forward and clutches at the back of Techno's t-shirt, hiccuping and sniffing. Techno's arms eventually come to rest around his middle, and Tommy sobs harder, breaths coming in gasps and shoulders shaking. Techno's hands are trembling.

"You've never called me Toms before," Tommy whispers in lieu of explaining the rest of it, grip tightening on Techno's shirt, and Techno, still shaking, holds him closer. Tommy buries his face in Techno's shoulder, eyes squeezed shut. "I'm sorry..."

"You've got nothin' to be sorry for," Techno tells him, and for the first time in a long time, Tommy believes that.

Tommy doesn't *mean* to spill water all over Phil's blueprints.

Really, he doesn't.

Maybe he shouldn't be snooping around the home office in the first place, but he'd been trying to find a phone charger after he'd accidentally ripped the cord in two. There had been a particularly annoying jumpscare in the movie that Techno had been making him watch in an attempt to cheer him up, and Tommy hadn't gotten his strength in check before the wires had snapped.

But he *does* spill the water on Phil's blueprints, and Tommy immediately freaks the fuck out. It's probably important, and now

he's just gone and ruined it! "Shit, shit, shit," he mutters, putting his water bottle and the charger he'd found down and running into the kitchen to grab a shitload of paper towels. He runs back and starts to blot the paper, but he just spreads the water around more, making an even bigger mess. "Shit!"

"Everything okay in here?" Phil asks from behind him, and Tommy jumps. His shoulders fall, and he tries to shield the damage, only for Phil to peer around him and sigh. "Well-"

"I'm so sorry! I was in here looking for a charger, and I just-! It was an accident, I *swear*, Phil, I didn't mean to! I-I'll clean it up, I'm trying to dry it off, but I don't think it's working," Tommy rambles, and Phil's brows furrow. "I can try and help you redraw them! I'm not very good, but I'll help as much as I can, Phil, I'm so sorry I ruined them, I know they're probably important-!"

Phil shakes his head and puts a hand on Tommy's arm. "Toms, slow down, it's *fine*," Phil says, and Tommy blinks at him. There's no *way* it's fine, he'd *wrecked* Phil's blueprints. As if he can sense what Tommy's thinking, Phil waves dismissively. "Mate, these are *years* old and there are already digital copies, it's really no big deal. Are you feeling alright?"

"I... yeah, I'm fine, I just fuckin' panicked for a second, that's all," Tommy says, and Phil nods, though he still looks concerned. Tommy gestures at the blueprints with the wad of wet paper towels in his hand. "So, uh. Should I just throw these out?"

"Yeah, we can throw 'em out," Phil says easily, gathering up the sopping pile of blueprints and dumping them into the bin. Tommy drops the paper towels in after, and Phil claps a hand on his shoulder. "Wanna help me in the garden for a bit?"

Tommy shrugs. It's not like he's got any plans; he's still recovering from the fight with Automata, so he might as well help out here. He follows Phil out into the backyard, and Phil grabs two pairs of gloves and a watering can from the shed. He hands Tommy a pair and pulls on his gloves. Tommy struggles to tug the rough fabric over his calluses without grimacing, but he manages.

He follows Phil towards the vegetable patch, and Phil nods towards the carrots. "Are they ready? They kind of look... limp," Tommy says, poking at the drooping leaves, and Phil raises a brow. Tommy puts his hands up in front of him placatingly. "Alright, alright, I'll take your word for it, old man."

Phil nudges his shoulder with the watering can, and Tommy carefully uproots the carrot. It looks pretty great, actually, stunted roots notwithstanding. "Told you so, you little shit. Keep working on those carrots, I'm gonna water the tomatoes," he says, and Tommy nods. He starts to yank the carrots out one by one, carefully adding each one to the slowly-growing pyramid of them. It's kind of peaceful, in a way. Even though his back is starting to hurt from being hunched over, the work is nice. Phil nudges Tommy's leg with his foot. "You always have to make sure you give the carrots a chance to get some decent flavor, that's why I plant 'em by the tomatoes."

"Does that really make them taste different?" Tommy asks as he pulls another carrot out and adds it to the pile. Phil nods, giving a little extra water to one particularly dehydrated-looking tomato plant. Tommy smiles gently and keeps pulling carrots. They're gonna have a ton of shit for the next few weeks. Maybe he'll invite Tubbo and Ranboo over so they can fuck around in the kitchen. "I haven't helped you in the garden in ages, I forgot how nice it can be."

"The crows have missed you," Phil tells him, nudging him again, and Tommy rolls his eyes. He squints up at the birdhouse, and Phil snorts. "Well, they're not here *now*, mate, but they miss you giving them random shiny shit every time you're out here."

Tommy shakes his head. "They're far too spoiled, Phil, you have to discipline your crow children better," he says, and Phil bonks him lightly with the watering can. Tommy pulls out the last of the carrots and dusts his gloves off on his jeans. Phil leans down to inspect one of the tomato plants and pulls off a few, handing them to Tommy. He adds them to the carrot pyramid. "Right, what's next, then?"

Phil crosses his arms, looking rather amused. "If you want, you can check on the strawberries to see if any of them are ready while I go get a basket," he says, and Tommy lights up. The strawberries Phil

grows are fucking *incredible*, and this is the last time this year they'll get fresh ones before the winter freezes over most of the garden! Phil ruffles Tommy's hair, and he starts to head back towards the shed.

Tommy walks over to the strawberry patch, frowning at the few leaves that are already turning brown and falling off. There's a spider on one of the strawberry bushes, and Tommy smiles gently, crouching down to let it crawl onto his hand. The Sense chirps happily, and Tommy rolls his eyes. "You and me aren't so different, y'know," he murmurs, and the spider just looks up at him. Tommy nods. "Yeah, we're basically brothers. Or half-brothers, I guess, I'm not *totally* a spider. Are you gonna hibernate? I've heard that's what we're meant to do during the winter."

The spider just crawls up to his knuckles. Tommy chuckles and lifts his hand so that the spider can come up and sit on his shoulder as he scours the bushes for ripe strawberries. There are a few good ones, some less-good-but-still-fine ones, and some completely unripe ones. As he's looking through the last bunch, a hand swats his shoulder, and Tommy gasps, whirling around.

"There was a spider on your shoulder, mate," Phil tells him, two baskets under his arm. One's already filled with the carrots and tomatoes, and he hands the empty one to Tommy, nodding at the strawberries. "You can put the berries in here, and we'll-why do you look so sad?"

"You knocked the spider down," Tommy says, his full attention on the ground in hopes of finding the spider again. Phil gives him a look of utter confusion, and Tommy just shakes his head, going over to the strawberry bushes to pick them off and put them in the basket. "I *like* spiders, Phil, I had him on my shoulder because I'm *fond* of him."

Phil laughs, like Tommy's just told him a hilarious joke-understandable, Tommy's jokes are *always* hilarious-but then he stops. "Oh, you're serious," he says, and Tommy nods as Phil crouches down beside him. "I'm sorry, Toms, I didn't know you wanted the spider there. Most people aren't big fans of having spiders on them, y'know."

"Yeah, well, I'm not 'most people,' Phil," Tommy mutters, keeping his gaze strictly on the strawberries as he makes his way down the line. And it's true, he's *not* most people. Maybe he's being a little sensitive about it, but Tommy feels quite protective of spiders now. People give them too much flak, and all spiders do is mind their own business and eat bugs that are actually harmful. "Doesn't matter now, though, he's already gone."

"I found him," Phil says, sounding vaguely horrified and making the funniest fucking face of disgust Tommy's ever seen as he holds out the spider at arm's length and deposits it on Tommy's shoulder. Phil shudders and shakes his head. "God, I really don't understand you sometimes, Tommy. Not even in the normal 'I don't understand my teenage kid' way, in the 'why the fuck do you *enjoy* having spiders on you' way."

Tommy snorts and stands, the last of the strawberries having been put in the basket. "It's fine. I don't think anyone really understands me anyway," he says, shrugging, and Phil's brows furrow in concern. Tommy waves him off, taking the spider from his shoulder and depositing it gently on the leaves of the same strawberry bush he'd found it on. "There, now he can remember how to get home. He'll get lost if you just toss him on the fuckin' ground, Phil."

With a sigh, Phil nods. "Sure. I'll be careful not to let the spiders get lost," he says, and Tommy beams at him. Phil pats him on the back and starts to lead him back towards the house. "C'mon, then, let's get the dirt out of your hair."

Tommy reaches up and runs a hand through his curls. Sure enough, some dirt falls into his face, and Tommy coughs, sputtering and making a face as some of the dirt gets into his mouth. "How the fuck did I even do that?!" he asks, bewildered, and Phil just shrugs helplessly. As they get into the kitchen, Kristin looks up from the sink, giving them a sudsy wave before getting back to the dishes. "Hey, Kristin, guess what? I got a spider to sit on my shoulder, and Phil almost *killed* him, but it's fine, we found him again."

Kristin looks between them with a raised eyebrow, and Phil shudders. "Don't ask," he says, and he sets the basket of carrots and tomatoes on the counter. He gives Kristin a quick kiss on the

cheek, and Tommy pretends to gag. Phil swats at him, and Tommy puts the basket of strawberries next to Phil's. "Right, then, c'mere, let me get the dirt off. Shut your eyes."

"You're not the boss of me," Tommy says, though he closes his eyes anyway as Phil reaches up to rid his hair of the dirt. "I'm closing my eyes because I *want* to, not because you said so."

"Mhm, sure," Phil says, and Kristin chuckles. Tommy hears the tap turn off, and Phil takes his hand away. Tommy opens his eyes again, carefully peeling the gardening gloves off. Phil's brows furrow, and he moves forward to inspect Tommy's hands. "Woah, how the hell did your hands get so rough, mate?"

Kristin looks worried, too, and Tommy shrinks back. Shit. He's gone and made them all concerned again. "I was hanging out in the tube line again," he says, and Phil tuts. "I know, I know, I'll stop going down there."

She smacks his chest lightly with a clean spoon, and Tommy makes a face. "You *better* not go anymore, I heard those villains have been hanging around down there," she says, and Tommy nods. He's well aware, thanks. Kristin nods at Phil. "You're gonna give your old man a heart attack one of these days, Toms, I swear."

"I don't *mean* to, I'm just prone to stressing people out, apparently," Tommy jokes, though it apparently falls flat, given that Kristin and Phil are both looking at him like he's said something horrible. "Oh, c'mon, I didn't mean it like *that*, it was a joke! Please don't turn it into a lecture."

Phil's brows furrow. "Tommy, you know we're just teasing when we say that, right?" he asks, and Kristin nods along, drying her hands on the dishtowel. Tommy just shrugs. This isn't really a big deal, he makes jokes like this all the time, he doesn't understand why they're so concerned. Phil frowns and looks between each of Tommy's eyes. "Mate, you're a good kid, we hardly have to stress about you. We're just worried, that's all."

Tommy hums. "I know," he says. "I just don't *want* to worry you."

"We're always gonna worry, kiddo, that's our job," Kristin says, putting an arm around him and pulling him into a hug. Tommy sighs and leans into it. He'd normally pretend to hate this. He'd normally squirm and pull away and protest, even though he doesn't mean any of it. But right now, he doesn't have the energy in him to try and convince anyone he hates affection. "Oh, buddy, you're *really* going through it, aren't you?"

"Fuck off," he says, muffled by her shoulder. Kristin rubs his back, and Tommy feels that annoying urge to start crying for no reason again. Phil ruffles his hair. "Can we have steak and carrots tonight?"

Kristin chuckles lightly. "I'll see if I can convince your dad," she says, and Phil makes a vaguely offended noise.

"Since when am I the bad guy? You're gonna be the one grilling, decide for yourself," Phil says, and Tommy moves away from Kristin to rinse off a strawberry and take a bite of it. Phil smacks his hand lightly. "If you're gonna ask for something specific for dinner, don't ruin your appetite."

"I could literally eat a five-course meal right now and still have room for dinner," Tommy tells him flatly, and Kristin laughs.

Phil shakes his head, amused. "Whatever you say, mate."

Kristin hands him another strawberry, and Tommy smiles softly to himself. Maybe it's a little lame to admit, but he really does like spending time with his parents.

This is nice.

Finals have been kicking my ass lately, so uploads *might* slow down. I hope they don't, and they might not, but I wanted to let y'all know, just in case!

dinner with the watsons

Chapter 39: dinner with the watsons

Wilbur invites Sally over for dinner, Techno and Tommy have a talk, and Dream is... Dream.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Tommy's not sure why they're making an effort.

It's not as if Sally doesn't already know how much of a mess they are. If *everything* about Wilbur hadn't already tipped her off, she's met Tommy. Arguably, the calmest members of their family are Techno and Phil, and they're both absolute nutters in spite of the facade. Techno collects swords and Phil talks to crows. Not to mention, Kristin is a silent agent of chaos who loves to embarrass them.

When Tommy walks into the kitchen, pulling at the collar of his stuffy button up-which Wilbur had made him cover with a jumper, citing stains that don't exist-he's not at all surprised to see Wilbur wrestling with Phil over the salad bowl, Techno patiently mashing potatoes in the corner as he keeps a wary eye on them.

"Oh, for the love of God, could you two stop fighting? She's gonna be here any minute, you know," Kristin says, and Wilbur lets out a shout of frustration, Phil grinning in victory as he steals the salad bowl away. Kristin points at Wilbur. "Come help me find our old photo albums, I wanna show Sally how cute you were in your sand-eating phase."

Okay, maybe Tommy understands why Wilbur had told them to act like a normal family when Sally comes over to dinner tonight.

"You will be doing no such thing," Wilbur hisses, eyes narrowed. He looks to Techno, who lifts his bowl of mashed potatoes up, as if to say 'Look, I'm being productive *and* quiet,' and Wilbur nods once. Now his attention is on Tommy, and that's definitely not good. "You. Fix your hair."

"I just spent *ages* brushing it, Wil!" Tommy whines, and Wilbur tuts, pushing him towards Kristin, who stifles a laugh behind her hand as she ushers him towards the bathroom. Tommy looks in the mirror, and he groans at the sight of his hair. There's definitely some resemblance there to the bushes in their backyard. Tommy huffs and turns towards Kristin, who already has a brush in her hand. "Kristin, I *swear* I brushed it!"

Sighing, Kristin turns his shoulders gently and starts to run the brush through his hair. "I know, buddy, I know. It's getting pretty long, we should get you a haircut sometime soon," she says, humming absentmindedly as she somehow manages to tame the mess of curls. "Hey, I think it's long enough to let me braid a little bit of it. You want me to?"

Tommy blinks. He's never had his hair braided before. "Um. Sure," he says, and Kristin smiles softly, giving his shoulder a light pat. She combs her fingers through his hair, and Tommy hums. He'd forgotten about the whole touch-starvation thing, this actually feels really nice. He hums and leans into the touch as Kristin braids.

"There you go. All set," she says, and the elastic snaps quietly into place. Tommy takes another look at himself in the mirror, a slight smile on his face when he sees the neat braid tucked behind his ear. Kristin beams at him and gently pats his head. "Look at you! You look great! Now let's go embarrass your brother."

"I heard that!" Wilbur yells from the kitchen, and Tommy snorts. The doorbell rings, and Wilbur shrieks; it's rather funny to hear. Tommy and Kristin walk to the kitchen, and Tommy bursts out laughing as he watches Wilbur run frantically around the kitchen, cleaning everything in his sight. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, she's here! You *have* to remember not to-"

"Embarrass you, we know," Phil interrupts, swatting at Wilbur's arm.

“Stop cleaning and go answer the door! It’s bad manners to keep a lady waiting.”

Tommy grins and follows Wilbur to the door, only to falter a little at his raised brow. Thankfully, his genius brain supplies him with something to drive Wilbur a little more crazy. “I wanna say hi to my future sister-in-law,” he taunts, and Wilbur smacks him upside the head before throwing open the door and grinning.

“Sally! You look absolutely *stunning* tonight, your hair looks great,” he says, and Sally leans in to kiss him. Tommy makes a face. Gross. When they finally fucking pull apart, after at least a whole second, fucking ick, Wilbur gives Tommy’s back a pat that’s just a *bit* too hard. “Sorry about the kid. He wanted to say hi.”

Sally chuckles, and she pulls Tommy into a hug, which is unexpected, but not unwelcome. “Hey, kiddo! It’s so great to see you guys, thanks for having me for dinner,” she says, and Tommy grins at her. He leads the way into the dining room, where Techno’s setting out wine glasses. There’s already an annoyingly large glass of water at Tommy’s usual chair.

Phil nudges his side. “Gotta make sure we don’t have a repeat of Saturday,” he mutters, and Tommy goes red in the face. As Wilbur pulls out Sally’s chair for her, Phil smiles and settles down in the chair beside Kristin. “It’s great to finally be meeting you, Sally, we’ve heard *loads* about you.”

Tommy slides into the spot next to Techno, and Wilbur sits beside Sally. “Uh, no, they haven’t, I talk about you a very normal amount,” Wilbur says, and Sally giggles, bumping her shoulder against his. Tommy rolls his eyes, and Wilbur kicks at him from under the table. Phil starts to pass around the bottle of wine, and Wilbur grins. He’s so nervous it’d make Tommy laugh if he weren’t trying to be a decent brother and keep it together. “So! I hope you like red.”

Techno starts to pass around the plate of steaks, and Tommy piles three onto his own before passing the plate to Sally, who nods approvingly. “Atta boy,” she says, grinning, and Tommy passes her the plate. Sally turns her smile to Kristin and Phil. “Thank you so much for having me, you have a lovely home.”

"Oh, thank you!" Kristin says, and Tommy rips a hunk of steak off with his teeth. Kristin stifles a laugh behind her hand. She passes the bowl of potatoes over and nods at Techno. "These are the best mashed potatoes you'll ever have. Techno's got a gift."

"I'm incapable of cooking anything *but* potatoes. It's a curse," Techno corrects, and Tommy snorts, grabbing a roll from the center of the table and taking a bite. Techno makes a face and nudges Tommy's side, then gives Wilbur a shit-eating grin. "Hey, Wil, why don't I tell Sally about the time you—"

"Please pass me more wine," Wilbur says loudly, and Sally laughs, leaning into him. Tommy goes to pass the bottle, only to have Phil grab it before him and pass it over. Wilbur snorts at that and turns towards Sally. "Oh, yeah, did I tell you Tommy got fuckin' *wasted*, by the way?"

"So we're not allowed to make fun of *you* but embarrassing *me* is on the table?! What the fuck?!" Tommy demands, and Sally reaches over to pat his hand sympathetically. Presumably, Phil had already told Kristin, because she doesn't look the least bit surprised. Tommy turns to Sally with a determined glare. "Wilbur writes songs about you in our music room."

Wilbur goes red and throws a roll at him. "I do *not*! Unless that's something you think is charming rather than weird...?" he asks, and Sally rolls her eyes fondly. Wilbur waves his hands around frantically. "Let's just eat! No more talk of anything I have ever done or not done, depending on the degree of stupidity."

Sally and Tommy both immediately continue with their steaks, Techno subtly elbowing Tommy to get him to slow down. "You teach phys ed?" Phil asks, and Sally nods, an easy smile on her face. Tommy figures that to any other kid, seeing a teacher in their house would be weird, but he's gotten so used to Wilbur's friends coming around that this just feels normal. Phil takes a sip of wine and glances at Wilbur. "Does she know?"

"Do I know what?" Sally asks before Wilbur can start protesting, and he goes red. Tommy snickers, already knowing where this is headed. Sally taps her nails on the table. "Are you a murderer that

targets phys ed teachers or something? What is it?"

"No, no, nothing like that," Kristin says, and Wilbur puts his face in his hands. Tommy leans forward in his seat with a grin, and Techno stifles a snort behind his hand. Kristin smiles, and Tommy takes another bite of his steak. He's on his second one now. "When Wilbur was still in school, he failed phys ed so many times that we had to get him an exemption."

"Do you *want* me to die? I will, I'll do it," Wilbur threatens, and Sally aww's at him. He gives her a glare and shakes his head. "If you start up, I swear to God—"

Sally puts a hand over his mouth and grins. "Wilbur took me to go rock climbing for our first proper date and couldn't even get off the ground," she says, sounding so fond that Tommy makes a face. Wilbur yanks her hand away and pouts, pushing his potatoes around on his plate with his fork. "It was cute, Wil! I carried you up, it was a good workout!"

Phil bursts out laughing and Tommy nearly chokes on his water. "That's incredible," Techno says, "please tell us more. Please show us pictures."

"She will be doing no such thing," Wilbur hisses, and Techno puts his hands up placatingly.

Sally gives Techno a wink. "I'll tell you later," she stage-whispers, and Wilbur chugs the rest of his wine.

Tommy finds himself smiling. This is actually pretty fun.

"... and this is the child's room," Wilbur says, and Tommy looks up from his desk, covering up the sketch of a more efficient web shooter with a school assignment. Wilbur nods at him, and Sally waves. "I'm just giving Sally a tour of the house. You're the last stop because Dadza needed me to tell you we're having dessert in a minute, but you know him, he's on his way to remind you himself anyway."

Tommy nods. "Okay, I'll be down in a bit," he says, and Wilbur leaves, presumably heading downstairs with Sally. Without shutting the door again, of course. Tommy cups his hands around his mouth and raises his voice. "Close my fucking door, dickhead!"

"You're coming downstairs anyway!" Wilbur shouts back, and Tommy groans.

Wilbur's *technically* right, but it's the principle of the thing. Tommy gets up to go close the door, only to be surprised by Phil in his doorway. "Hey, mate, are you gonna come down? Kristin's got the photo albums out, but on a less embarrassing note, I made brownies," Phil says, and Tommy snorts.

"Yeah, alright, I'll come down. But I won't have any brownies, they're too sweet," he says, and Phil's brows furrow as they both make their way downstairs. Ah, Kristin's already got the album open to that one dumb picture of Wilbur, Techno, and Tommy himself. "That picture is the worst one of me in existence."

Sally gives him a warm smile. "You look the exact same now as you did then," she tells him, and Tommy makes a face, glaring at the tiny polaroid taped to the book. It's one from when Tommy was really little, like six, and he's got this stupid look on his face, being held by Techno while Wilbur's halfway through a sneeze. At least he's not the only one making a face in the picture.

It's also, he realizes, the last photo where Techno'd been the one holding him.

Every other picture from then on until Tommy had been too tall to pick up has Wilbur, Phil, or Kristin holding him, and Techno's as far away from him as possible. Kristin and Sally are cooing over the pictures, especially the ones where Wilbur's got sand on his face, but Tommy can't bring himself to do anything more than smile weakly.

He's not *upset* that Techno's not close to him in the pictures. Tommy'd had Wilbur, after all, and he'd also had Tubbo and Foolish-and-Ranboo, later on-so there's nothing to be upset about. Even if he can practically *hear* Bad telling him that it's okay to be angry or

upset about it, Tommy's not! He's not, because there's nothing to be upset about.

Tommy swallows and turns away, spotting Techno pulling on his boots, axe perched carefully on his shoulder. "Hey, Tech, can I help you get some firewood?" he asks, and Techno looks vaguely surprised, but he nods nonetheless. They head into the backyard, and Techno leads the way over to the pile of logs by the shed. Techno gestures to the log closest to them, and Tommy puts it on the tree stump, making sure it's steady before backing away and letting Techno bring the axe down on it. "So, um... did you see the photos?"

"I was in 'em, I don't have to look again to remember," Techno grunts, gesturing to the halves of the log, and Tommy sets it back up again. Techno chops the halves in half and grabs the pieces, tossing them to the ground. Tommy sets another log up. "Why d'you ask?"

He chops it in half again, and Tommy shifts uncomfortably. "No reason," he lies, and Techno raises a brow at him. Tommy sets the halves up. The axe comes down. Another log. "I just thought that, y'know... it's kinda weird that we don't have any together. I mean, not after I was, like, five. There's ones with me and Wil, and *you* and Wil, and me and Kristin, and-well, you get it."

Techno's brows furrow as he chops the log. "We probably have some, they just might not be in that album," he says, and Tommy nods, even though he knows that that's not true. He remembers sorting through every album they'd had in tears after his tenth birthday party. There's nothing of the two of them after Tommy's fifth birthday, let alone a picture of Techno being anywhere *near* him in a group shot.

Bad's annoying advice nags at the back of his head.

"There's... there's *not* any, though," he says, and Techno misses the next chop. Techno looks towards him, and Tommy glances back at the house. "Y'know. It's not a big deal. Just thought it was weird."

Techno tosses the axe down and gathers up the quartered logs. The one that had only been halved stays on the big stump. "I mean, it's

not like we didn't spend time together," Techno says, chuckling, and Tommy shifts from foot to foot. "We just don't have any pictures of it, I guess."

"Well, I mean... we kind of didn't, though," Tommy says with a nervous laugh, and Techno looks confused. This is really uncomfortable. But Bad had told him that it's good to talk about things that bother him, and since this particular thing is bothering Tommy right this moment, it can't hurt to mention it, right? "You kinda stopped talking to me. When we were kids. I mean, I get why, it's fine, it's not a big deal anymore."

He turns to head back to the house, embarrassed, because Techno clearly has no idea what he's talking about, and this is absolutely mortifying. "Wh-kid, slow down! I've gotta carry firewood, hang on," Techno says, and Tommy grimaces. He turns around anyway, but still. "What are you talkin' about?"

"It's nothing, let's just go inside," Tommy says, and Techno gives him a flat look. Tommy groans, already regretting having brought this up. "I didn't *mean* anything by it, man, let's just... I wanna go eat brownies, c'mon."

"That's a lie, you hate brownies now," Techno says, and Tommy momentarily wishes to have the Techno that knew nothing about him back. Then, of course, he feels guilty about wishing for it. "I hate talkin' about feelings. You know that. So the fact I'm askin' you to share yours right now oughta tell you I'm takin' this seriously."

Tommy scuffs at the dirt with his shoe. "I don't... it doesn't matter anymore, it's done with, I don't know why I'm-! It's passed. The feeling's passed," he says, and Techno glares at him, unimpressed. Stupid Bad and his stupid advice. "It just bothered me, that's all. This is dumb, *you're* dumb, and I hate you. Bitch."

Rolling his eyes, Techno sets the firewood down. "I'm not fallin' for that," Techno says. "So tell me what's goin' on with you before I hold you upside-down by the ankles and shake it outta you."

"You're a real piece of shit, y'know that?" Tommy says, aiming a weak kick at Techno's ankles and keeping his eyes on his shoes. "I

told Bad about, um-about the whole... thing where you stopped talking to me when I was seven. I mean, I guess you didn't *stop* talking to me, but you kinda... it felt like you really hated me, man. It felt like you couldn't stand to be around me, that you only ever acknowledged me because you felt like you had to. Sometimes... sometimes it still does. And I don't know why. I *still* don't know why. Not really."

Techno's brows furrow. "Tommy, that's not-"

"No, no, I really don't understand it, Techno, I *never* understood it. You told me I wouldn't get your mythology books, that I'd never be able to sit still through Shakespeare o-or Hemingway, you told me that you didn't want to play cops and robbers anymore, told me that you were too old for the stupid games me and Tubbo would play. But *Wilbur* kept hanging out with me, so I didn't understand why you wouldn't. I kept thinking that if I did enough 'older kid stuff' you'd like me, it's why I convinced Mum and Dad to get me piano lessons, it's why I tried so hard to get good grades so you'd think I was smart, because *Wilbur* thought I was fun, *Wilbur* thought I was smart, *Wilbur* wanted to spend time with me, and *Wilbur* was cool and mature and older than *you*, and *he* still wants me to be his little brother, so why the hell don't *you*?!"

Tommy's shoulders are by his ears, his face is burning, and he's trying really hard to ignore the way his eyes are stinging. There's a lump in his throat, and he keeps his eyes on the ground. His nails dig into his palms; it's grounding. Techno is quiet for what feels like forever, and Tommy briefly considers going back inside. That would prevent him from having to talk about this again, from blowing up at the people he cares about *again*. He's definitely going to yell at Bad next Wednesday for his stupid suggestions.

Then, Techno's arms wrap around him, and Tommy's face is suddenly planted in the shoulder of Techno's coat. "I was a really crappy brother, wasn't I?" Techno asks, and Tommy laughs, shaking his head. "I'm still kinda bad at it. I didn't even realize, I... I really am sorry, Tommy. I'm tryin' to be better about it, and I know that doesn't erase the things that I did-or, uh, didn't do, I guess-and I *will* be better about it."

“Two hugs in as many days *and* an apology? Am I dying or something?” Tommy jokes, because he doesn’t want to talk about his actual feelings anymore. Techno pulls back from the hug and frowns at him.

“Don’t joke about that. Not when it can actually happen, anyway,” Techno tells him, and he claps a hand on Tommy’s shoulder. “Let’s go bully Wilbur.”

Tommy grins.

It’s a really good thing that patrol had gone off without a hitch today, because Tommy’s honestly not sure if he’d be *nearly* as personable if it had been shitty.

The Sense, evidently, had not gotten the memo to play nice, because it is *very* angry at the fact that Dream is sitting in Tommy’s living room.

“Oh, uh... hello, Dream,” Tommy says, smiling awkwardly, and Dream’s eyes crinkle up in the corners. That mask is still so unsettling. Dream pats the spot next to him, and while The Sense is screaming at him not to, Tommy sits down anyway, because he doesn’t want to be impolite to the guy that Phil is currently being paid by. “How’ve you been, big man?”

“I’m doing pretty great, all things considered. That little thorn in my side is still at it, but I’ll work it out eventually,” Dream says, and Tommy nods. Dream adjusts his mask and clears his throat, and Tommy looks around the room idly. This is very awkward. “How are things with you? I heard you went to a party.”

Tommy groans. Phil’s *really* gotta stop embarrassing him like this. “I did, and I would really rather not talk about it,” he says, polite smile now strained, because the last person he wants to be talking to right now is Dream. Well, actually, there are a few villains that are pretty low on the list, so maybe Dream’s not in last place.

Dream waves dismissively. “Nah, I’m not gonna tease you. I get how

those types of things can be. Peer pressure can be rough,” he says, surprisingly sympathetic, and Tommy blinks. Dream laughs. “Of course I get it, man, I’m not *that* old! I’m, like, only old enough to be your brother. I’m not gonna give you a dad lecture, I’m sure you got enough of that already. Besides, you’re a great kid.”

“Oh, uh... thanks,” Tommy says. That’s honestly kind of nice of him to say, even if The Sense is insisting that it’s sinister. “Yeah, peer pressure’s a bitch.”

Shaking his head, Dream pats Tommy’s knee. “You oughta get yourself some better friends, man, get some better influences in your life,” he says, and now it’s just plain rude again. Tommy has the best friends in the world, thank you very much. He wouldn’t trade Ranboo for anything, even if he *had* been super weird at the party. Dream waves again. “But, eh, what do I know? I’ve only got two friends, and neither of them can do their *one* job right without my help.”

Tommy politely laughs at that, because it really does seem like Dream’s trying to come across as joking, even if his tone is more bitter than anything. “So, uh, how’s the building coming along?” he asks, and Dream’s eyes crinkle at the corners again.

“It’s going great! Your dad’s a talented guy. It’s getting done much faster than we expected, so we *really* had to move up some plans,” Dream says, and Tommy nods. That sounds like Phil, always overachieving. At least it pays the bills. “We’re working on this one thing-can’t tell you the details, of course, but-it’s getting *really* tedious. I almost considered scrapping the whole idea to just... start over. Unfortunately, I don’t really have the resources for that.”

“That sounds like a pain in the ass,” Tommy says, and Dream chuckles. “Reminds me of a project I did with Tubbo this one time in Niki’s class. We were supposed to graph a bunch of fuckin’ equations or whatever so that they made a shape, and we wanted to do something *crazy* elaborate, but then Tubbo was all like, ‘What if we did a circle?’ so then we googled it and found the answer. Got full marks and everything.”

Dream raises a brow, amused. “Is this a weirdly roundabout way of

telling me to work smarter, not harder?" he asks, and Tommy shrugs. Sure. If that's what Dream wants to hear, why not? It's not like Tommy's telling him what to do, so he can't possibly be blamed. Dream tilts his head curiously. "You're a really smart kid, Tommy. If only half my employees thought like you, maybe I wouldn't have to run around all damn day like a chicken with its head cut off."

Tommy snorts. "Yeah, well, sadly for you, not everyone can be as amazing and brilliant as me," he jokes, and Dream gives him a good-hearted laugh. "Nobody else seems to understand my genius like you. Y'know, Wilbur always says I'm like Las Vegas. Shiny on the outside and full of shit."

"Are you kidding? He's lucky to have a little brother like you!" Dream says, and Tommy laughs, a little taken aback by that. He hadn't meant anything by it—neither had Wil, of course. "You know, I'd *kill* to have a brother like you. Before my mom... well, I shouldn't dump all that on you, kid. How are things at school?"

That's an abrupt change of topic. Tommy smiles nervously. "Uh, they're pretty alright. I got made head boy, so it's a lot more responsibility than I'm used to," he says, and Dream gives him a hearty pat on the back.

"There you go! That's a huge accomplishment! Congrats, man," Dream says, and Tommy laughs. Dream is honestly much less intimidating now, even if The Sense is still lurking at the back of his mind and nagging at him to get away. "Your family must be really proud."

"Oh, uh... they don't exactly know about it," Tommy admits. He still hasn't told Phil and Kristin, and while he *did* mention it to Techno in passing while he and Tubbo explained the whole 'Quackity is actually a terrifying supervillain' thing, he hasn't told Wilbur either.

Dream looks vaguely shocked to hear it, but before he can ask any questions, Phil comes into the living room. "Ah, hello, Tommy, didn't hear you come in," he says, and Tommy gives him a weak wave. The Sense angrily makes the back of his head start to pound as Phil gets closer to Dream, and Tommy winces. Phil hands Dream a file. "I looked over that expense report, and you're right, they're totally

ripping us off.”

The Sense makes his skull feel like a fucking prison, and all of the hair on Tommy’s arms stand on end as Dream takes the file from Phil. His arm involuntarily starts to shoot forward, but Tommy stops it in time. “Sorry about that, fellas, dunno what’s gotten into me today,” Tommy says through gritted teeth, mentally chastising The Sense for being so fucking stupid. Dream’s not gonna hurt Phil, and if he even tries, Tommy’s *right there*. He can stop it.

“You feeling alright?” Dream asks, brows furrowed, and Tommy nods. All things considered, he should be feeling great. He hadn’t run into any villains today, he’s successfully stopped three robberies and two muggings, and he’d saved his favorite food truck owner’s dog from running into the road. Dream puts a hand on his shoulder, and The Sense decides that the best way to go about this is sending paralyzing fear down Tommy’s spine. “Do you need water? D’you wanna lie down somewhere?”

“Toms? Everything okay, mate?” Phil asks, and Tommy nods again, blinking rapidly. Oh, *fuck* this, The Sense is trying to make him have a full-blown panic attack. Phil looks to Dream, rather worried, and he quickly turns back to Tommy, hands hovering as though he doesn’t know what to do with himself. “I think he’s having a panic attack. Tommy, are you-what’s going on?”

Tommy shakes his head frantically, but The Sense just keeps pushing and *pushing*. “I-I’m fine, I swear, I’m not having one,” he says, shaky in spite of the effort he’s making to keep it steady. He can’t fucking stand The Sense sometimes. Dream’s not a threat! Phil gingerly puts his hands on Tommy’s shoulders. “I’m fine, Phil, really, I just-I’m not-! Dammit!”

Phil gives Dream an apologetic look. “I’m gonna take him upstairs and help him through it if I can,” he says, and Tommy swears under his breath.

“No worries, no worries, do what you have to do,” Dream says, sounding genuinely concerned, which Tommy fucking *wishes* The Sense would understand. “I’ve gotta get going anyway, it’s no problem. I hope you feel better, Tommy.”

"Thanks," Tommy says, and Phil gently guides him towards the stairs and to his room. The Sense seems to be quite happy about that. Bastard. Tommy sits down at the bed and presses the heels of his palms against his eyes. "Fuck, fuck, *fuck*, I'm so sorry, Phil, I didn't mean to ruin your business thingy, I-"

"Hey, hey," Phil scolds softly, "you didn't ruin *anything*. Is everything alright? Do you need me to call anyone? Tubbo? Puffy? Bad?"

Tommy shakes his head. "No, no, I don't need to talk to anyone, I'm just-I'll calm down in a minute, it's this *stupid* thing," he mutters, and The Sense takes offense to that. At least it's calming down now that both he and Phil are away from Dream. "Fuck, Phil, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to freak you out."

"It's fine, Tommy, no need to apologize," Phil tells him, and Tommy nods, trying very hard to take deep breaths and calm himself down. He even does the dumb counting trick that Bad had taught him to do. Phil rubs his arm lightly. "That's it, kid, keep breathing. You're alright, you're here, you're safe with me."

"I know," Tommy says in a voice much smaller than himself, and he looks up to see Phil's small smile. "Thanks for staying with me."

"Of course, Toms," Phil says, "you can always count on me."

Y'all. I'm not fridging Kristin for plot/character development, I promise, lol.

Hope you guys liked this chapter! Also, I have a Tumblr for this account now! I'm fathermooshroom over there too, come say hi (if you want to)!

hemophobia

Chapter 40: hemophobia

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Well, isn't *this* just fucking peachy?

Tommy's out on patrol, of course. It feels like he hardly does anything else these days, even with all his end-of-term schoolwork and head boy duties. And what, you may be asking yourself, does he see? None other than mayoral candidate Schlatt, campaigning yet again in the middle of the fucking city.

He's up on a stage, presumably giving some kind of speech, and Tommy can see a little cluster of protestors by the barricade. He feels a little vindicated by that; a few of the signs even have spraypainted depictions of his mask. It makes him smile. What *doesn't* make him smile, though, is the worryingly large crowd lapping up every goddamn word that Schlatt says.

"I hate this fucking guy," Tubbo says, and Tommy nods. Schlatt is the worst, and Tommy's saying that *with* the supervillains in mind. *"You should go down there and say something. Don't let him talk shit about you! Guys like him don't have any fuckin' guts, Tommy, I'm telling you!"*

"You know what? You've got a point here, Tubs, I think I *will* say something," Tommy says, and Tubbo makes a triumphant little *hmph!* noise as Tommy swings towards the building above the stage platform.

Schlatt's shaking his head. "And let me tell you, when I found out about the horrific incident at Spider-Man's little meet-and-greet, I was *floored*," he says, and Tommy narrows his eyes. Tubbo scoffs, and at that, Tommy has to stifle a laugh. Schlatt sighs. "I mean,

seriously. So much irresponsibility. Any public figure, especially public figures that are often *targeted*, know to have the proper security protocols in place. It's basic safety shit!"

The crowd cheers. Oh, that's not good.

Tommy hops down and peeks around Schlatt's shoulder. "Ooh, great turnout, man! What a crowd," he says, feigning awe, and the smattering of protestors starts to cheer and shout his name. This is a fucking adrenaline rush. Schlatt whirls around and stares at him with comically wide eyes, frantically looking towards his security guards. Tommy leans closer and grins. "We both know you're not gonna have them do anything on national news."

"Oh, you little *shit*," Schlatt grumbles, too quiet to be picked up by the mic, and Tommy grins, nudging him out of the way.

"Just a quick refresher on what *actually* happened," he says, and the crowd starts to murmur to each other. Tommy taps the mic. "First of all, it wasn't *my* idea, I was approached by a fan and wanted to talk to the community, hear their questions and concerns. I had *no idea* some wackjob with a box for a face was gonna show up!"

Schlatt laughs sardonically and shoves him to get to the mic again. "C'mon, anyone could've seen it coming. I mean, seriously, you plaster a Spider-Man event all over Twitter and *not* expect a supervillain to come and *endanger* civilians?" he scoffs, and Tommy narrows his eyes.

"My bad, I forgot I'm apparently responsible for what domestic terrorists choose to do," he says, and he grins as a good amount of the crowd starts to nod along. "If you're gonna sit here and blame me for supervillains that already had the technology on the way before I even went public, you go ahead and do that, but it doesn't make any sense to me."

Schlatt glares at him, and Tommy's grin turns smug. He's clearly getting under Schlatt's skin, and it's showing. Schlatt shoulders past Tommy and tries to overtake the podium. "I am so sorry for the interruption, it's almost as if vigilantes with no respect for the law have no respect for *manners*, either," he snarls, and a few people in

the crowd applaud. Damn. Tommy's losing them. Schlatt grins. "Listen, kid, you might as well go home. For once in your life, leave it to the professionals."

Tommy tilts his head in mock curiosity. "Oh! I had no idea that the *professionals* are getting cars and bombs and knives thrown at them as well, that's on me," he says, and Schlatt blinks. "You can call me incompetent, but who's there for London when it *really* counts? The people don't have any faith in the police anymore—"

"Because you've actively undermined their authority," Schlatt says, leaning into the mic, and Tommy struggles to get to it.

"I haven't undermined *anything*. All I've done is *help*, as much as I can and to the best of my ability. For you to sit here, doing nothing, calling me out with the absolute *gift* of hindsight has *got* to be the most *stupid*—"

"Gotta love ad hominem, am I right, folks?" Schlatt interrupts, gripping the podium with both hands, and Tommy's brows furrow. "I'm not doing *nothing*, I'm campaigning to make it so that people like *you* can't run around pretending to be a hero and breaking laws. The people of this great city had nothing to fear before *you* brought supervillains into the equation!"

"Pretty sure if it weren't for me, the 'professionals' would have to be dealing with the villains, thanks. Besides, the only thing I'm fearing right now are those dreadful sideburns," Tommy says easily, and the crowd of protestors whoops. Tommy winks at them. "Thank you, I'll be here all week!"

Schlatt laughs again, and it sounds forced. "And we're supposed to leave the situation in *your* hands? The hands of a man who let an esteemed officer *die* because of your own negligence and arrogance?" he says, and Tommy feels like he's been shot. And as someone who *has* been shot before, Tommy can attest that the feeling isn't great. "Not to *mention* the casualties of your other desperate grabs at victory. Anybody remember that horrible blackout?"

A good few people in the crowd cheer. Tommy goes pale. "*Relax!*"

You've got this," Tubbo says easily, "just talk to Schlatt like you'd talk to a criminal!"

Right. Tommy can do that. Tommy can do quips and banter, it's his specialty! "And while *you* were handing out blankets for a camera, actual citizens were patching the city's electric grid back up again! Hope you enjoyed the photo op as much as the people you *didn't* feel like caring about on camera enjoyed the cold," Tommy says, and there's a little commotion from the crowd at that. Schlatt's voter-schmoozing grin falters. "You know, Schlatt, I'd tell you who you remind me of, but I feel like that'd be a disservice to Reddit moderators everywhere."

About half of the crowd laughs-some surprised, some genuine, some positively cackling-and Tommy grins smugly down at Schlatt, who grows visibly angry. "Oh, you think you're *so-*"

"Clever? Hilarious? Devilishly handsome? All of those are true, just a shame I can't give you concrete evidence of the third," Tommy says, and Tubbo cackles over the comms. Schlatt is fucking fuming, and it's kind of funny. "Geez, if you can't handle a few hecklers, maybe being a 'public figure' just isn't what you're cut out for. I mean, look at me! My hecklers *shoot* me and I never look *nearly* as stupid as you do right now. Or is that just your face? Genuinely can't tell. Does he *always* look like a wanker, or...?"

He aims that last question at the crowd, and they collectively lose their fucking minds, cheering and laughing. The group of protestors is the loudest. Schlatt shoves Tommy out of the way and takes a firm stance at the podium. "Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to *sincerely* apologize for this trainwreck-"

"No need, I'm sure they're used to it," Tommy calls out, and Schlatt swears under his breath. It's picked up by the mic, and the crowd guffaws again. There's a low rumble in the distance, and Tommy lets out a low whistle. "Gotta go, fellas! Things to take care of, cities to save, you know the drill. And remember, if a strange man with bad facial hair confronts you on the street and tells you to fear your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man, kick him in the balls *immediately!*"

The crowd goes nuts, and Tommy gives them a two-fingered salute before swinging off towards the source of the rumbling.

“Automata’s causing problems down by where Phil works,” Tubbo warns him, and Tommy swears under his breath. He’ll just redirect Automata to somewhere else, it’ll be fine. As Tommy lands atop a nearby building, he wonders what the hell Automata’s doing all the way out here. It isn’t as though there’s anything worth stealing or destroying over here. *“This is probably just a distraction, but you ought to take care of it anyway.”*

Tommy nods and hops down to stand across from Automata, arms crossed. “Don’t you have anything better to do on a Wednesday evening?” he asks, and Automata tilts his stupid TV head at him. Tommy’s feeling fairly mellowed out-his appointment with Bad earlier today and getting to tell Schlatt off on national television were both pretty great.

“I do, actually, so I’m hoping you’ll give up fast enough,” Automata says, and Tommy narrows his eyes. The Sense starts to raise its metaphorical hackles, and Tommy glances at Automata’s twitching fingers. Something’s coming his way. Tommy dashes out of the way of a lamppost, and it crashes into a nearby building. Christ, this guy really *doesn’t* care about property damage. As Automata rips another from the ground, Tommy fires off a web at him. The dodge forces Automata to drop the lamppost, and Tommy dashes forward, his punch missing Automata by mere inches.

Tommy leaps backwards as Automata throws a car towards him, and Tommy ducks behind a dumpster, firmly sticking to it so that when Automata tries to toss it out of the way, Tommy can launch himself directly at Automata. They tumble onto the ground, and Tommy goes to punch through the television, only to find his wrist caught in a floating piece of metal that is straining to hold him back.

His brief confusion gives Automata a window of opportunity to shove him away and put more distance between them. Tommy steadies himself and gets into a defensive stance. The Sense is on the lookout for any incoming objects, but it seems like Automata needs a minute to gather himself as well. “Why are you fucking around over here, anyway? I hate to break it to you, but if you’re looking for

more steampunk garbage to put on your outfit, Party City's that way," he says, pointing in the opposite direction of where he knows Phil's building is.

Automata chuckles lowly and brings his hands together. Wow, Automata really likes the whole metal-objects-circling-him schtick. "Hiding behind the dumpster was a really smart move, kid. Good job," he commends, and Tommy's stance falters as he blinks in confusion. Seriously, what the fuck is this guy's deal? Automata sends the wave of miscellaneous shit in Tommy's direction, and Tommy swings out of the way, landing on the awning of a nearby shop. Automata tilts his head again. "I thought distracting you would be *much* harder, but throwing things in your direction seems to do the trick just fine. I expected better from you, Spider-Man. Don't disappoint me now, things are just getting good!"

Tommy scoffs. If Automata wants to play games, Tommy will make his own damn rules. A brilliant idea pops into his head, truly one for the ages. "Okay then, asshole, tell me... have you ever heard of a move called 'the dragon?'" he asks, and Automata just stares at him.

"What the hell is that? What's the dragon?" he asks, and Tommy grins.

"*Dragon* deez nuts-! Ah! Stop throwing cars at me!" Tommy shouts as he dives out of the way of a particularly shitty-looking Honda, which crashes into the shop. Shit. Tommy gestures to the crater in the brick, and Automata laughs. "Dude! Not everybody's got insurance!"

Automata shrugs and rips up another fucking streetlamp. "Sucks for them," he says, and Tommy catches the post, firmly planting into the concrete next to him. Seriously, Automata's *gotta* stop destroying the street.

Tommy feigns left, then dashes behind a line of parked cars, silently apologizing to their owners as he sneaks forward. Sure enough, Automata starts throwing the cars every which way to get him to reveal himself, but he hesitates at the last car, probably remembering the dumpster trick.

"Is it too early to bring out Shroud?" Tommy whispers, and Tubbo's typing starts up. Shroud whirs quietly, and the spider sigil on his chest rapidly unfolds into the little drone. Tommy pats its head, and Shroud scuttles out into the street.

Tommy snorts as he hears Automata yelp in alarm. "What the fu-!"

He's abruptly cut off by a small *boom*, and Tommy peeks around the edge of the car, only to see Automata covered in webs. "*I may or may not have added a synthetic web bomb to Shroud's arsenal,*" Tubbo says, and Tommy grins, dashing forward to tackle Automata into a wall. That should keep him occupied for a few minutes.

Shroud clambers up onto Tommy's shoulder, and Tommy dusts off his hoodie. "Say hello to my little friend," Tommy says, cooing at Shroud's cute tiny sets of red eyes. Automata struggles against the webs, and Tommy snorts. "You look like a fuckin' worm, man. Hang on, let me get a pic."

He starts to take out his phone, only to be interrupted by several small metal objects flying at him. Of *course*, Automata's hands are still uncovered. Tommy fires off a few webs, but not before Automata's already got a jagged piece of metal cutting through the synthetic webs. Yet another car comes Tommy's way, and he flips back, crouching and readying himself for more incoming objects.

The Sense chirps, and Tommy ducks to the left as Automata *barely* misses the side of his neck with a syringe. Oh, *that's* fucking creepy. Tommy whips out a web towards the syringe and tugs it into his own hand, handing it off to Shroud. Shroud's abdomen opens up, and the syringe is tucked away. Tubbo can experiment with whatever that shit is later, but right now, Tommy's dodging a bunch of various car parts and shrapnel.

Shroud quickly compacts back into his chest, and Tommy swings up onto a rooftop, eyes wide as Automata steps onto a car door and lifts himself into the air. "I've got a few tricks up my sleeve," he says. "You really shouldn't underestimate me, Spider-Man."

The Sense quickly tugs at the back of Tommy's mind, and he ducks, just as the vent from the roof goes flying right over him. That

would've knocked him off of the fucking building! Tommy should probably start running. Not that he's a coward, he just generally dislikes bodily harm, and he's fairly certain that Techno would freak out if he comes home with a multitude of horrific injuries again.

"And *you* shouldn't overestimate my tolerance for bullshit," Tommy says, hopping off the building and swinging off in the opposite direction of Automata. There's no way Automata can catch up with him now that Tommy's ducking and weaving between alleys and side streets, right?

The big metal *T* from the Tesco's sign that crashes into Tommy's side says otherwise.

Tommy topples to the ground, wincing and pressing a hand to his ribs as he tries really hard to catch his breath. Son of a *bitch*, that smarts. Automata lands elegantly in front of him, stepping off the car door like a delicate little shit and glancing boredly at the pedestrians running away and screaming. How pleasant.

"I expected more from you," Automata says as Tommy struggles to stand, and Tommy fires off two webs to propel a kick towards Automata. He connects, thankfully, but Automata starts to pull miscellaneous parts from a nearby building to push him back. Tommy tries to dodge and weave his way through the flying objects, but Automata just keeps pulling.

Nearby buildings have started evacuating; that's probably a good idea, all things considered. There's a loud creaking noise from behind him, but Tommy keeps trying to close the distance, swinging a road sign on a web as a sort of shield to push through the metal objects Automata keeps throwing at him.

Eventually, the creaking gets so bad that even Automata pauses, and Tommy turns to see a building start to crumble. Thankfully, it seems like everyone's out of it, save for the guy still helping people out of the lobby. He doesn't get a good look at who it is, though, because The Sense makes Tommy turn his attention to the car headed his way, and Tommy catches it, digging his heels into the ground as he skids back. Tommy sets the car down and turns back to the building as Automata starts to pull more from it, and his eyes

go wide.

Phil.

It's Phil that had gotten the last person out, and the building collapses around him.

Tommy's ears start ringing. He might be screaming, but he can't be sure; his head goes too fuzzy to register anything but the feeling of his soul being sucked out of his body.

Tommy barely registers Tubbo's gasp on the comms, and he numbly raises a hand up to block the incoming car that Automata throws at him, catching it by the bumper. Tommy turns slowly back towards Automata, who seems rather shocked that he'd caught the car with one hand, and Tommy grabs another nearby car with his free hand, fingers crushing the metal in his grasp and denting it, probably beyond repair.

He doesn't have time for this. Phil's trapped under the rubble, probably injured, in need of help, and Automata is still playing this stupid fucking game of cat and mouse. Automata stumbles backwards as Tommy rears one arm back and throws the car at him as hard as he possibly fucking can, throwing the other almost immediately after. Automata desperately dodges as Tommy throws every fucking thing he can get his hands on towards him, and finally, *finally*, he retreats.

Tommy runs towards the building, adrenaline and fear pulsing through his veins as he digs through the rubble. The Sense cries out in anguish and terror as he runs into a maze of walls and rubble, shoving glass and concrete out of the way. Towards the front, in a space nearly closed off, is Phil. *Phil.* Tommy scrambles to shove the rest of the debris off of Phil, eyes widening and breathing quickening as he unveils the massive metal pipe that's stabbed into Phil's side. There's a horrible red stain that's quickly spreading across Phil's nice white shirt-Kristin had ironed it for him this morning, he had driven Tommy and Tubbo to school, he'd told Tommy to have a good day today-and Tommy hurries to web up the wound.

"You're gonna be alright, you're okay, the webs will stop the

bleeding, I promise,” Tommy says, not even caring at the horrible tremble his voice carries. Phil groans, and his eyes flutter open. He looks tired. Tommy carefully moves Phil’s torso up so that he can check for an exit wound, and sure enough, the jagged end of the broken pipe sticks out from the torn hole in Phil’s shirt.

As Tommy hurries to web up the wound and tries to help Phil into a more comfortable position-Tubbo’s surely calling the paramedics, they’ll be here any minute, Tommy’s sure of it, he tells Phil this-Phil’s brows furrow. “It’s alright, you did as much as you could,” he tells Tommy, and he doesn’t *know* it’s Tommy, Phil probably thinks he’s dying in the arms of a stranger. Tommy nearly gags at the way the blood from Phil’s side leaks onto his hands, and Phil chuckles, which turns into a wince and a cough. There’s blood on the side of his mouth. “Don’t worry so much, you did great, okay?”

Tommy’s chest seizes, and he carefully reaches up to lift his mask, knowing that if there were any risk of someone else seeing, Tubbo would have warned him by now. He wants Phil to look at him. He wants Phil to look at him, to see his face, just in case. Just in case. “I’m so sorry,” he whispers, voice catching in his throat as Phil’s face twists in confusion, pain, and realization. “I didn’t mean for this to-please don’t die, Dad, please don’t-you can’t... you can’t leave me, alright? Stay awake, *please* stay awake.”

In lieu of a response, Phil lifts a shaking hand up to cup Tommy’s face, and Tommy’s entire body shakes with violent tremors. He can’t hear sirens yet. Phil still has to hang on until the paramedics get here, they’ll fix him, they *have* to fix him. Phil smiles gently, and Tommy chokes on a sob. There’s so much blood.

It’s all over Tommy’s arms, all over his front, and it’s all over *Phil*. There’s nothing but red, so much red, and it’s leaking out of Phil’s mouth, dripping down his chin. It’s probably on Tommy’s face, smeared across his jaw from how shaky his hand had been as he’d pulled up his mask. It’s probably on his cheek, where Phil’s hand is warmly settled.

“I can’t tell you how proud I am of you,” Phil says, and that sounds far too much like he’s leading up to last words, which isn’t right. It’s not right, Phil’s going to be *fine*, surely the paramedics can’t be far.

Tommy tries to put more webs on the wound, but Phil's hand comes down to gently hold his wrist. "It's alright, mate. I-It's okay-"

"It's not okay! It's not okay, Dad, I-I Fuck!" Tommy chokes out, shoulders shaking as he tries to hold in his sobs. Phil is so pale. He's pale, which isn't right. It's not right, because Tommy's not used to him looking like that, looking so close to death.

Phil's face should be full of *life*, he should be laughing about Tommy getting embarrassed, he should be singing along badly to one of Wilbur's songs, he should be grinning about how great Techno's grades are, he should be fondly rolling his eyes at Kristin joining in on calling him old. He shouldn't be pale and getting colder, shouldn't look so limp and tired.

Phil reaches up again and gently tugs Tommy's mask back down. "Don't... don't risk your identity on my behalf, Toms," he whispers, and Tommy just cries harder, trying really hard to ignore the way the mask sticks uncomfortably to the blood on his face. His dad's blood is on his face. Tommy hunches over and gasps through a sob. Phil chuckles shakily and gives Tommy's arm a barely-there squeeze. "Hey, is this... is it why you were so attached to that spider?"

"You saved him," Tommy says, voice cracking, "and you saved the people in your building, Dad, you're-you're a hero, y'know? You're the bravest man I've ever known. Surely you know that, *surely*."

"The guy that faces down villains every day is telling me *I'm* brave?" Phil jokes weakly, and Tommy laughs wetly, nodding. Because Phil *is* brave. Phil's the most incredible person Tommy's ever known, and Tommy's the luckiest motherfucker on the planet to be able to call him Dad. He tells Phil as much, and Phil smiles, though it looks more like a grimace. There's more blood. Phil coughs and takes a really shaky breath. "Tommy, I'm... I am so proud of you. You and Wilbur and Techno, you're all-"

"Don't talk like that, don't say things like you're trying to have some poetic last words or some shit, because they're not gonna be your last words, they're *not*," Tommy says, and Phil gives him an unsure hum. "Y-You're gonna come home, and you're gonna tell Mum you love her, a-and then me and Wil and Tech are gonna pretend like

we're grossed out, a-and then we're all gonna have a family dinner, just like we have every day. You're gonna be *fine*, Dad, y-you have to be."

"I'm not sure I get a choice, mate," Phil tells him, and his eyes start to flutter again. Tommy shakes his head frantically and tries to put more webbing on his wound. Phil doesn't have the strength to stop him this time. Tommy perks up slightly at the sounds of sirens, but they're definitely not close enough for Phil to hear yet. "You're a great kid, and I know you'll do great things. You can't... you can't save everybody, Toms."

"I can save you," Tommy says, still defiant, even as the only part of his hoodie that isn't stained red in some way is the actual hood. "I-I'll save you, you're gonna be fine, they'll get here in time, they're on their way right now, Dad, please, just-just stay *awake!*"

Phil mouths something-it's hard to tell what it is with his vision so blurred by tears, but Tommy's pretty sure he knows what Phil had said anyway. "It's okay," Phil whispers, and Tommy presses a hand down on Phil's side, as if *that* will stop the blood-blood everywhere, so much blood, it's soaking through his gloves now.

Phil's eyes slide shut, and Tommy screams. It dissolves into a cry, and he slumps forward, clinging to Phil, body heaving with sobs. His fingers twist in the fabric of Phil's shirt, and Tommy presses his forehead to Phil's chest, counting each fleeting heartbeat carefully. The sirens start to get closer, finally, *finally*, and Tommy cries out, trying his hardest not to look at Phil's face, because if he looks, it'll be real, it *can't* be real. Phil's chest is still moving, albeit slowly, underneath Tommy's hand, so he'll live. Surely he'll live.

The ambulance pulls up to the police barricade, but no one comes out. "Please!" Tommy screams, clutching Phil to him as best as he can considering the metal pipe. "Please, you have to help him! He needs help, he's-he's really hurt! Anyone! Please! Please, *help* him! *Help me!*"

The sirens are too loud, everything's too loud, the lights are too much, and *no one has come to help Phil yet*. Tommy's throat feels raw, but he doesn't care. He just keeps begging and screaming as

loud as he can for someone, for *anyone* to come help Phil. After a minute-a minute too long, Phil might not have a minute-the ambulance moves past the barricade, and Tommy sobs go from panicked to relieved as the paramedics come out.

“You’re gonna have to let go of him,” one of them says gently, and Tommy nods, swallowing around the lump in his throat as he watches the paramedics carefully load Phil onto a gurney and into the ambulance. It’s terrifying to watch. The paramedic puts a hand on his shoulder, and Tommy damn near jumps out of his skin. “Are you injured? Do you need medical assistance?”

“No, no, no, I’m fine, please just... help him,” Tommy whispers, voice hoarse, and the paramedic gives him a skeptical look, but she gets back in the ambulance anyway. Tommy looks down at himself and bile rises in his throat. There’s blood all over him.

Phil’s blood is all over him.

Tommy stands numbly and stumbles out of the rubble, idly walking in the direction of the nearest emergency room. He gets to the barricade and numbly pushes past the cops, who are actively trying to berate him, and Tommy follows the sound of the sirens. Phil’s with the paramedics now, so surely he’ll be fine. They’ll save him. They’ll keep him safe.

Tommy just keeps walking down the road, ignoring the stares of pedestrians and the shutter snaps of cameras. He has to get to the hospital. He has to go see Phil, he has to make sure that they save him. Tommy hears someone call out for him-well, for Spider-Man-but he doesn’t stop walking. *He has to get to the emergency room so he can see Phil.*

It’s started to rain. Not that Tommy cares much. He’s still walking. He *has* to keep walking. What kind of son would he be if he didn’t visit his dad in the hospital? Surely Phil is fine. He’s still got garden projects to work on, buildings to design, family game nights to have. Tommy just has to see him, he has to look at Phil, who’s alive, who’s *still breathing*. Surely he’s still breathing.

Someone grabs his arm, and Tommy flinches violently, jumping

back and instinctually shifting into a defensive stance. “It’s just me,” Tubbo says, and the numbness shatters. Tommy falls to his knees and hangs his head, hugging his arms around himself and trying his hardest not to start crying again. Tubbo kneels down next to him and puts an arm around him. “Come on, bossman, let’s get you somewhere more private.”

Tommy nods, and he lets Tubbo guide him back up and through an alleyway, to where Techno’s car is waiting. Techno gets out of the car, and the dam bursts. Tommy’s sobbing again by the time Techno gets to him. “I’m so sorry,” he whispers, and Techno makes a distressed sort of noise that Tommy’s never heard from him before. “I couldn’t-he was-Tech, he could *die*.”

Techno swallows hard, and he ushers Tommy over to the car. “Wouldn’t be the first time someone from this family has their blood all over the seats,” he jokes weakly, and Tommy just crumbles into a myriad of apologies. Techno gestures for Tubbo to get into the car too, and he takes Tommy’s mask off. “Come on, buddy, let’s get you home. We’ll get cleaned up and go straight to the hospital, I promise.”

“I’m so sorry,” Tommy says again, voice breaking, and Techno and Tubbo exchange a worried glance.

On the car ride back, Tommy closes his eyes and *hopes*.

It’s all he can do now.

Hope you liked this chapter :)

comatose

Chapter 41: comatose

Tommy, Techno, Tubbo, and Kristin wait for news.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Tommy has been sitting in this awful waiting room chair for forty-five minutes.

Not that he minds, of course. He barely registers anything that's happening, let alone the numb discomfort of the plastic. Tubbo is hurriedly texting next to him, and Tommy stares at the front desk. He's pretty sure the receptionist hates him, but he's too... what is he even *feeling* right now? Fear, surely. Horror, check. A crushing weight of guilt that smothers his very soul? Absolutely. The numbness is the most prominent. Techno had said that it's probably shock when he'd wiped Phil's blood off of Tommy's face earlier.

Tommy just keeps staring at reception. Techno's up there talking to a nurse. Tommy wonders if things are *supposed* to sound like they're happening underwater right now, but he'd feel stupid if he asks. Thankfully, he snaps out of whatever's causing it as Techno walks back over to them, looking rather frustrated.

"They don't have any updates yet. I'm pretty sure they'll have me escorted out if I keep botherin' them," he says, and Tommy blinks at him in acknowledgement before turning back to reception. He sees Techno exchange a wary look with Tubbo in the corner of his vision. "Uh, Tommy...? You okay?"

Tommy hums. He just needs to wait for news. Tubbo nudges his side. "I texted your mum, she's stuck in traffic," he says, and Tommy

just hums again. Tubbo looks worried, and he looks to Techno, presumably for some support. Tommy keeps staring at reception. “Uh, is he...?”

“I have no clue,” Techno sighs, and he tucks his phone back in his pocket, clearly frustrated with something. “I’ve tried calling Wilbur, like, twenty times. He’s not picking up.”

“Maybe he’s on with Kristin,” Tubbo suggests, but Techno doesn’t seem very comforted by that, letting out an uncertain noise that sounds a little like he’s being strangled. Tommy watches one of the receptionists switch out the flowers in the vase. He wonders where Phil is. Tubbo nudges him again, and Tommy finally tears his eyes away from reception. “You hungry, bossman? Do you want some water? You haven’t had anything in ages.”

Tommy turns away again. He doesn’t need food, he doesn’t need water, he just needs to sit here and wait for news. Techno crouches down in front of him, blocking his view of reception, and Tommy makes a vague noise of protest as he tries to crane his neck to see around him. “Hey. Tommy, look at me, you need to eat,” Techno says, and Tommy’s bottom lip starts to tremble. At that, Techno winces. “Aw, no, don’t-please don’t cry, kid, I didn’t mean it like... you didn’t do anything *wrong*, you just-you gotta eat, buddy.”

“You used up all that energy, remember? And you’re probably exhausted, not to mention your metabolism’s gone into overdrive to help with the, uh... injuries,” Tubbo adds quietly, and Tommy looks down at his hands. He’s shaking a little. That’s probably not good, all things considered. Maybe they’re right, maybe he ought to eat something. That way he can be fully alert when they finally give him news about Phil. Tubbo rubs his back gently. “There you go. C’mon.”

Tommy stands, as does Techno, and Tubbo guides him over to the reception desk. At that, Tommy perks up. “My dad,” he says, and the receptionist looks nervously over at Tubbo. “I need to know where my dad is.”

“What he *means* to ask is where the food court is,” Tubbo cuts in, and the receptionist seems rather relieved at that. Tommy frowns at

Tubbo, who pointedly refuses to look at him. The receptionist says something-Tommy's not paying attention, it's not about Phil, so it's unimportant-and Tubbo gently tugs on Tommy's wrist to bring him down the hall.

"I need to know where Dad is," Tommy mumbles as Tubbo makes him sit down at one of the little tables. Tommy just stares out at the hallway they'd come from, wondering if he can eat fast enough to make it back without missing anything.

Tubbo brings back a tray of various things-mostly meats and a few heartier things like potatoes and bread. He sets down that, along with a cup of coffee, down on the table. "I wasn't sure what you'd be able to stomach, but I *do* know you've still got that weird cardboard thing going on, so here," he says, and he looks unusually worried. Tommy just tries to eat as much as he can as fast as he can so that Tubbo gets less worried and he can get back to waiting for news about Phil. Tubbo's brows furrow. "Slow down, man, you're gonna choke. Can't have two Watsons in the hospital, alright? Shit. Sorry. Bad joke."

Tommy waves dismissively and keeps eating. He hadn't realized just how hungry he'd been before now. Besides, the faster this is done, the faster he gets back to the waiting room, and logically, that means he'll get news of how Phil's doing faster. Right? "Done," he says, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, and Tubbo blinks. Tommy chugs the coffee and promptly turns to start heading back for the waiting room. "I need to know where Dad is."

Tubbo catches up to him in the hall and huffs. "I know you're not doing so great right now, but could you please say *any* full sentence other than 'I need to know where my dad is' to let me know you're not, like, broken or some shit?" he asks, and Tommy hums, still hurrying to get back to the waiting room. Tubbo steps in front of him and crosses his arms. Tommy blinks, taking a moment to get his bearings, but as he starts to move around Tubbo, he's abruptly stopped by Tubbo firmly tugging him into a hug. Tommy freezes. "I'm going to hug you now, because you're my best friend, and this shit... you don't deserve it, and Phil didn't deserve it, and I *know* you're blaming yourself and feeling whatever kind of grief that comes with that. But it's not your fault, Tommy. It's not your fault."

Tommy takes a shaky breath. It *had* been his fault, though. He was meant to take the fight with Automata further *away* from Phil's building, not towards it. And he could have driven Automata off faster, gotten to Phil quicker, taken him to the paramedics rather than waiting for them to come to him. Phil's in the hospital because of *him*, and they don't have any information, and Tommy's just waiting and waiting and *waiting* to hear whether or not he'd gotten his dad killed.

And the worst part of it is that he can't even say anything of worth. It feels like if he speaks, he'll fucking break down even more, and staying quiet-only interrupting to ask where Phil is, if he's okay-is what's keeping him held together. Tommy feels like a ball of rubber bands, and one in the stack has snapped. One band has snapped, and if he talks, if he *moves*, if he does anything other than sit and wait, the rest of the ball will unravel, and Tommy will be falling apart at the seams, leaving Tubbo and Techno to pick up the pieces.

He supposes, as Tubbo squeezes him a little tighter, that they already are.

"I want to go sit down now," Tommy manages, instead of thanking Tubbo, instead of begging Tubbo to keep hugging him, instead of asking to hear Tubbo repeat that it's not his fault. He feels like he shouldn't be allowed those small comforts, not when Phil can't have them, not when Phil might *never* have them again.

Nonetheless, Tubbo knows Tommy better than that, and while he *does* help Tommy get back over to where Techno's reserved their chairs in the waiting room, he keeps a steadying hand between Tommy's shoulders. "How're you feelin', Toms?" Techno asks as Tommy slumps back into the chair next to him, and Tommy goes back to staring at reception. Techno sighs. "They'll tell us when they have an update, no point in starin' at 'em. Mom'll be here any minute."

Tommy sits up a little straighter at that. Fuck, what's he meant to tell Kristin? How's he supposed to explain what had happened? She's going to be fucking *devastated* if she isn't already, and Tommy's gonna have to look her in the eyes and tell her that he's the reason Phil's somewhere in this hospital, in God knows what kind of

condition.

“Don’t think about it too much. I can practically hear you spiraling,” Tubbo says softly, and Tommy lets out a quiet whimper. Techno grabs his hand and squeezes gently. Tubbo checks his phone again and his brows furrow. “Ranboo can be here in twenty if he walks, but the police barricades might-oh. Oh, *Tommy*, no, I...”

His view of reception grows blurry, and Tommy takes a shaky breath. “You can cry,” Techno tells him, quiet and gentle, and Tommy doesn’t *deserve* to cry, he’d already shed tears and screamed his throat raw, he has to sit and deal with what he’d done. Techno seems like he’s about to say something, but the entrance doors open, and he’s out of his seat by the time Tommy looks at him. “Thank God you’re here, Mom, did they tell you anything-”

“No, I just got told he’s in critical condition, I’m his emergency contact so they called me as soon as they found his ID and-were you *there*? How did you get here so fast? What happened?” Kristin asks, and Tommy flinches a bit. After she’s done hugging Techno, she turns to Tommy, and her shoulders sag. “Oh, kiddo...”

“It’s fine,” Tommy says, voice shaky, and Kristin immediately sits beside him, a hand delicately on his cheek, her thumb brushing away the stray tears that escape in spite of Tommy’s best efforts. “I’m fine, Mum.”

Kristin glances at Tubbo, who gives her a wince, and she sighs. “Has anyone gotten ahold of Wil?” she asks, and Techno shakes his head. Tommy slumps further in his seat, out of Kristin’s reach as he buries his face in his hands and tries to calm himself. He can’t lose it in front of her, can’t make her comfort him when this is all his fault. She gently smooths a hand over his curls anyway and clicks her tongue. “You look exhausted, Toms. Get some rest, we’ll wake you as soon as we hear anything, okay?”

“If you don’t sleep I will forcefully knock you out,” Tubbo tells him, nothing but worry etched on his face, and Techno nods. “Don’t worry, we’ll explain it. You just... stop looking like you’re a walking corpse, alright?”

Tommy frowns, but he curls up a little on the chair anyway; idly, he wishes he could fashion himself a pillow made of webs, but that'd give away his identity, so comfort isn't an option. At least, it *hadn't* been an option until Techno takes his coat off and offers it up. Tommy hesitantly takes it and folds it under his head.

He's rather emotionally exhausted in addition to being physically exhausted, which, in his experience, has never led to anything good. It's probably best for him to rest, and that way, when the news comes-whatever news it will be-Tommy can handle it like the big man he is. He's not sure what he'll say to Phil when he sees him next.

After all, he'd seen Tommy without his mask while bleeding out. Tommy wonders how he'll apologize. He'll find a way to do it, surely, but it might take him a while to find the right words, find a good enough way to make it up to Phil. He'd failed him, failed everyone in his family, and honestly, Tommy doesn't feel like he deserves the small comfort of Tubbo quietly rambling about some new show to distract him while Kristin runs her fingers through his hair. He doesn't feel like he deserves the sympathetic looks from Techno, the quiet understanding of just how horrible he's feeling right now.

In spite of what Tommy thinks he deserves, he falls asleep.

When he wakes next, there's still no news.

Kristin is clearly trying not to fall asleep, Tubbo's obviously fought that battle and lost, given his quiet snoring, and Techno is blearily staring up at reception from his position on the floor. With a soft huff, Tommy nudges Techno's leg with his foot and nods at reception. "Taken over my job, have you?" he asks, voice a little hoarse-from the screaming, from so much screaming-and Techno smiles weakly at him.

"You're more than welcome to take it back," Techno murmurs, and Tommy glances at the window. The sun has set. Tommy must've been asleep for *hours*. Techno nods, as if he can tell what Tommy's thinking. "You were exhausted. We thought it'd be best to let you

sleep. Not like anything's happened, but we'd have let you stay conked out through it if anything had."

"I still haven't been able to contact Wil," Kristin says, sounding tired. Tommy idly notes that most of the people that had been in the waiting room when he'd fallen asleep are gone by now, which is a bit irritating. But it's more worrying that Wilbur hasn't answered anyone, so Tommy tries not to feel jealous of other people getting to visit their loved ones and focus on fretting over Wilbur's safety instead. Kristin sighs. "I just wish they would tell us *anything*."

Tommy leans his head on her shoulder. "Sorry, Mum," he says, because he feels like if he *doesn't* say it, he's going to go insane. She gives his hand a light squeeze, as if to tell him he doesn't have to apologize. Tommy knows he does. Tommy knows he'll probably never *stop* apologizing. "Has anyone told Puffy that Tubbo's here?"

"I let her know when we were driving here," Techno says, and Tommy swallows at the memory of Techno covering the passenger seat with towels and ushering him, shell-shocked, into the backseat with Tubbo after helping him clean off Phil's blood. Techno squints at him. "Do you not remember? After I called Mom?"

"That... the whole thing kinda blurs together," Tommy admits, feeling small, and Tubbo shifts in his sleep. Techno's brows furrow. Tommy looks away. "I don't wanna talk about it."

They fall back into silence. Tommy feels a tired ache that seeps into his very bones. Even The Sense seems to be exhausted; it barely thrums at someone entering from the hall doors.

Wait. The hall doors.

Tommy stands, and the doctor that had emerged from the hall looks rather startled to see him so alert. Kristin stands as well, and Tommy swears he hears her pleading for news, *any news, please, please let him be okay* under her breath. The doctor gives them a polite nod. "Family of Phil Watson, I presume?" she says, and they nod, Techno moving to wake Tubbo. The doctor takes a deep breath. "Well, first and foremost, I want to let you all know that he's now in stable condition."

"Thank God," Kristin whispers, and Tommy feels so much lighter. Like he can breathe again.

The doctor doesn't smile, though, which is still worrying. "Due to the blood loss and the damage done to muscles and nerves, the surgery was... tricky. He has a good chance of pulling through, but our only shot at making sure of that was putting him in a medically induced coma," she says, and Tommy's stomach drops. Kristin puts a hand up to her mouth and makes a strangled kind of noise, and Techno's efforts in waking Tubbo abruptly stop. The doctor gives the three of them a sympathetic look. "It could be a matter of days, or it could take weeks. He's allowed visitors, but... prepare yourselves. It's never easy to see a loved one like this."

Tommy feels bile rise in his throat. Phil's going to look like he had bleeding out in Tommy's arms. He's going to be limp and pale and *cold*, surely he's going to be cold. He's going to be hooked up to countless machines, and instead of light teasing and easy banter, the room's just going to have that stupid rhythmic beeping, but Tommy should be *grateful* for that.

He should be *grateful* for the constant reminder that his father's heartbeat is still going, that the rhythm hasn't grown irregular or stopped in its tracks, but the mere thought of it makes him nauseous.

Techno puts a hand on his shoulder, and Tommy feels the grief flood his stomach, pouring in waves, burning like liquor. Feverish guilt makes him sway on the spot, and he stumbles his way over to the nearest bin, hunching over it as he retches. The grief, the horror, the thoughts, they all come spilling out of him, and the scratchiness in his throat gets worse as acidic misery forces its way out of him. Tommy sputters and coughs, trembling so badly his grip on the bin shakes the whole thing. Idly, he wonders whether it's vomit, snot, or tears that's running down his face, but he can't bring himself to care enough to figure it out.

Kristin is by his side in an instant, pulling tissues from her purse and fretting over him through tears of her own, gently cleaning his face. Tommy turns away briefly to gag, but there's nothing left in his stomach. Tubbo's finally awake, as it would seem, given that even in

a tired haze, he's immediately right next to Tommy, whispering quiet reassurances.

"C-Can we go and see him?" Tommy asks, voice barely there, and Kristin nods, blinking away her tears. She turns away from him and Tubbo, sniffing. "Mum, are you-h-he's gonna be fine, right? Right?"

"Of course he will be," Kristin says, "he's your dad."

Tommy goes silent, and the four of them follow the doctor down the hall. They stop in front of a doorway, and Techno shudders.

"Normally, we don't allow more than three visitors at a time, two at night, but seeing as these are... not exactly *typical* circumstances, we can bend the rules a bit," the doctor tells them, and Tommy doesn't bother to hear anything else before he's pushing past her into the room.

There's Phil, motionless in the hospital bed.

And the *beeping*.

Tommy's hands tremble as he comes to stand by the foot of the bed, feeling as though the wind's been knocked out of him. Phil's pale, sure, and he's not exactly full of *life*, but Tommy walks forward to gently take Phil's hand, and he's *warm*. A bit chilly from the hospital air, yeah, but warm in the way that makes Tommy sob with relief.

He's alive. He's alive, and Tommy hadn't gotten him killed.

He slumps into the chair by Phil's bedside and hurriedly wipes away his tears with his free hand, smiling weakly at Kristin as she comes to stand by him. She gently puts her hand on Phil's cheek and shuts her eyes, and Tommy has to look away as she starts crying. Techno seems frozen in place, which bodes well for Tubbo, who, after having heard confirmation of Phil being alive, has gone back to practically falling asleep standing up, leaning on Techno.

"What's going on?! Where is he?! Let me in, I'm his *son-!*" Wilbur's panicked voice comes from outside the room, and Tommy's stomach drops again. Kristin hurries over to the door, throwing it

open and whispering at the doctors in a hushed, harsh-sounding tone. After a moment, Wilbur comes into the room with Kristin, eyes wide at Phil's comatose form in the hospital bed. "Surely not. *Surely*. Dad's-he's gonna be fine, right?"

He'd aimed that question at Kristin, who nods and pulls him into a tight hug. Tommy's chest seizes at the sight of Wilbur weeping. He's got to keep Wilbur and Kristin away from this. Tubbo and Techno are in danger just from knowing his identity-Phil's in a fucking *coma*, for fuck's sakes-and he can't endanger them too. He's already caused them enough pain.

He should try to push them away. Just a bit. It might be hard, but he's not going to be the reason another person he cares about gets hurt. They would understand if they knew. But they *can't* know, so Tommy will have to swallow his pride and ice them out. It's foolproof. They can't get hurt if they're not close to him, so if Tommy has to force that to happen, he *will*. He'll be damned if something happens to Wil or Kristin. Over his dead fucking body, thank you very much.

Wilbur comes to sit beside him, and Tommy pointedly keeps his eyes on Phil. "Where were you?" Tommy asks quietly, wondering if Phil's comfortable in those scratchy white hospital sheets. Maybe they'll let him bring Phil some better stuff.

"I-I was at Sally's, my phone was dead," Wilbur tells him, and Tommy fidgets with the edge of the sheets. "Did you... does anyone know what happened?"

"There was a, um... there was a supervillain fight by where Phil works," Tubbo says, voice thick with sleep, and Tommy's shoulders hunch up a little. "He got caught up in it a-and... and Spider-Man managed to keep the bleeding in check until the paramedics got there. Since I follow Spider-Man's fights so closely, I-I called Techno and Tommy and told them what happened."

Tommy swallows around the lump in his throat as Wilbur huffs out a disbelieving scoff. "Of fucking course," Wilbur mutters, and Tommy's heart drops into his stomach. Maybe he won't even *need* to push himself away. Maybe Wilbur will end up hating Tommy's alter ego enough that it carries over to his civilian identity. Wilbur shakes his

head. "Sons of bitches, can't they *do* anything about domestic fucking terrorists, or are they just gonna leave it all up to Spider-Man?!"

Techno hums quietly, and Kristin watches the monitor displaying Phil's vitals with intense focus, brows furrowed. Tommy just takes Phil's hand again and closes his eyes. He's not really certain whether or not it counts as a prayer, but he finds himself mentally pleading with the universe that Phil will pull through. It wouldn't be fair if Phil dies now, not fair to Phil, not fair to Kristin, not fair to Wilbur or Techno or Puffy or Tubbo.

Even if Tommy's the reason it had happened in the first place, he doesn't think it'd be very fair to him either.

Tubbo gently puts a hand on his shoulder, eyes tired. "Puffy's here to pick me up," he says softly, and Tommy nods. Tubbo looks exhausted. "I'll come visit tomorrow if they let me, just... promise you'll get some rest, okay?"

Techno's mouth twitches upwards in what can't exactly be called a smile, but Tommy doesn't have a better word for it. "I'll make sure he does," he says, and Wilbur looks to Kristin in confusion, only to find her equally clueless. Tubbo gives Tommy's shoulder a squeeze before heading out, and Tommy scoots his chair closer to Phil's hospital bed, away from Wilbur's chair.

"He's gonna be okay, Toms," Wilbur says, and Tommy doesn't respond. If Wilbur's not going to get sick of Spider-Man, if he won't pull away on his own, Tommy has to do it. Tommy's got to push him away. He's got to be prepared to say things he doesn't mean, to give Wilbur the cold shoulder, even if he doesn't deserve it. Wilbur puts a hand on his arm, and Tommy shrugs it off, still staring down at Phil's sleeping-comatose, he corrects himself-face. "Tommy...?"

"I don't wanna talk about it, Wil," Tommy mutters, crossing his arms on the bed. Phil's chest is still moving; it was moving out there on the street, he'd been breathing and bleeding, and Tommy feels bile rise at the back of his throat at the memory of the blood covering his arms, his hands, his face. Techno gives him a worried look, and Tommy keeps his eyes firmly on Phil's face. "Mum, are you gonna

stay here as well?"

Kristin looks surprised, but she nods. "Yeah, of course. But you should go home, get some rest in an actual bed, bud," she tells him, and Tommy shakes his head. He's staying put, thank you very much. He needs to be here, needs to stay with Phil in case something else goes wrong, because maybe he'll be fast enough-close enough in proximity-to prevent it this time. Kristin frowns. "Techno, you can drive Tommy back home, right?"

"I'm not going anywhere," Tommy says, a little too loudly for the quiet hospital room. The silence, intermittently interrupted by the steady beeping of various machines, feels fucking suffocating. Tommy swallows hard and ignores Wilbur's concerned stare. "I'm not... I-I want to stay with Dad."

"I'll stay," Wilbur offers, smiling gently when Tommy glances over at him. "Phone's charged now, so I can keep you lot updated. Mum's right, you need to sleep in a bed, not in a chair. Not exactly the best environment for-"

"I'm fucking *staying*," Tommy reiterates, firm and determined, even if his voice wavers just a little. Techno stares at him with something indecipherable, and Tommy decides to only look at Phil now and ignore anything in his peripheral vision. It's easier than seeing the sympathy on his family's faces, the undeserved concern and worry. "Quit staring."

Techno's footsteps-he can tell because Wilbur hasn't gotten up, and Kristin's footsteps are much lighter-get close, and Tommy resolutely doesn't look away from Phil. "Could you guys give us a minute?" Techno asks, and Kristin and Wilbur leave the room. Techno yanks Tommy's chair back to put some distance between him and the hospital bed and crouches in front of him, much to Tommy's chagrin. "You can't go blamin' yourself for this, y'know. It's not your fault."

"It is, though," Tommy mumbles, looking everywhere but at Techno. "It *is* my fault, Tech, I... I'm the one who brought the fight over, I-I'm the one who kept egging on that green son of a bitch, it's... Techno, it's all my *fault*."

His voice is shaking again, and his vision blurs slightly. But he can't start the crying back up; he's done enough of that for a lifetime. Techno grabs his hand. "Hey, it's *not*. You're not responsible for what villains do, Tommy. You did all you could, and *you're* the reason Dad made it here in the first place. All you can do is help, and that's what you did," Techno tells him, and Tommy sniffles. "You were so brave, Toms. You held him and you helped him and you never gave up for a *second*, remember? You didn't stop yelling for help until they *listened*. You saved the day, just like you always do."

Tommy crumples a little at that. "Techno, I-I'm not... I don't know if I can keep doing this," he whispers, and Techno's face falls. "I-I know, I know, I made a commitment to the city, a-and there's no one else that can help with the villains-I just... I-I can't *do* this again, not to you, o-or Mum, or Wil, I can't-!"

He cuts himself off with a gasp, and he buries his head in his hands. Count in for four, hold for seven, out for eight, just like Bad had taught him. Techno gently pries Tommy's hands away from his face. "Woah, woah, woah, I didn't... I'm not sayin' you have to keep going, okay? You gotta do what's best for *you*, I couldn't give less of a damn about the city," Techno tells him, and while Tommy's comforted by that, they both know that London isn't exactly in good hands without Spider-Man. Techno sighs. "Just... take a break. Take as much of a break as you need, and if that break never ends, that's fine too."

Tommy gnaws at his bottom lip. "I'll get back to it eventually, I just... need some time," he says, and Techno smiles at him. Tommy clears his throat. "You can, uh, go home. I'll stay here with Mum."

"You really *should* come home, just to get some decent sleep," Techno says, uneasy, but he goes to get Kristin and Wilbur nonetheless. "He says he wants to stay. Can't convince him otherwise. Stubborn kid."

Kristin takes the chair next to Tommy and puts a hand on his back, rubbing little comforting circles. "You boys head back to the house, get some rest. We'll see you in the morning, yeah?" she hums, and Wilbur and Techno exchange a wary look before nodding and heading out. According to Tommy's phone, it's three in the morning.

Shit. Kristin gives him a worried look and tucks a loose curl behind his ear. "I'd ask if you're okay, but that feels like a stupid question."

Tommy huffs out a weak laugh and leans his head on her shoulder. He's not strong enough to try and distance himself from her. Not tonight. Maybe not ever. "I'm sorry, Mum," he mumbles, and she wraps her arm around his shoulders. They're both just looking at Phil now, and Tommy takes a deep breath. "D'you think Dad can hear us?"

"If he can, he'd tell you there's nothing to be sorry for," Kristin says lightly, and Tommy hums. If Phil were awake, he'd *actually* be freaking the fuck out over the fact that Tommy is Spider-Man, but Kristin doesn't need to know that. "Thank you for staying."

"You don't have to thank me," Tommy tells her. "Of course I'm staying."

"I can always count on you," Kristin murmurs. "Get some sleep, okay?"

"Okay," Tommy whispers, though he keeps watching the steady rise and fall of Phil's chest until he physically can't keep his eyes open anymore.

What else is there to do?

Phil's alive! Comatose, but alive!

Anyway, holy shit?? Thank you for 1500 kudos, that's insane!! You guys are super sweet, I'm glad you're enjoying the story so far :)

days like this

Chapter 42: days like this

A week passes. Tommy copes.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“Good morning, Dad,” Tommy murmurs, rubbing the sleep from his eyes as he sits up and stretches. He takes the vase from the side table and dumps the water out, refilling it as he hums something—likely one of Wilbur’s songs, he’s been coming by as much as he can to play them for Phil. Tommy sets the freshened-up flowers back on the table and yawns as he heads over to the bathroom to brush his teeth.

This has become a sort of routine for him. For a week now, Tommy’s been waking up at Phil’s side, freshening up the room, and only leaving to use the bathroom or head back home to shower quickly before pressuring Techno or Wilbur or Kristin into giving him a ride back to the hospital. As much as everyone else wants him to spend more time away from Phil’s bedside, Tommy adamantly refuses to do so. Phil’s here because of him, so Tommy might as well be as good of a caretaker as he can be. The nurses have even started to greet him by name, and he’s learned a lot about the maintenance of the various machines and IVs that are hooked up to Phil.

Kristin comes into the room with two full trays of food, and Tommy hums in greeting as he smooths out Phil’s sheets. They hadn’t let Tommy bring him any better ones, but at least he’s allowed to do small stuff, like putting on Phil’s favorite shows and music, so long as it’s not loud enough to bother other patients. The walls here are

pretty thin, after all. Kristin sets down the food on the rolling table, and Tommy gives Phil's hand a light squeeze before heading over to her and helping her with divvying up their breakfasts.

Breakfast with Kristin is always nice, even in the less-than-ideal conditions they're in at the moment. "I made sure to get you a lot of protein, but *please* have some fruit," she says, and Tommy makes a face, accepting his fate of having a good few pieces of hospital food court fruit on his plate. The last thing he wants to do is contribute to Kristin's stress. She hands him a steaming cup of coffee. "I think I *finally* got the machine to make some decent coffee."

"I'll be the judge of that," Tommy says lightly, but it's actually pretty good. Better than the coffee-flavored water they've been having for the past week. Kristin ruffles his hair and tiredly sips on her own coffee, settling in the seat next to Phil's bed. Tommy picks at a scone. "Dad's still sleeping. He'll wake up soon, though, I'm sure of it."

Kristin gives him a sad smile. "How are you feeling this morning?" she asks, and Tommy shrugs, nibbling on some ham. He's doing much better than a week ago—he'd been practically catatonic, after all—but how good *can* he be doing, considering Phil's predicament? Kristin hums and brushes some hair away from Phil's forehead. "Well, Tech and Wil are dropping by soon. I'm pretty sure Wil's charmed the nurses into letting him bring along however many people he wants."

Tommy nods along; it's not that he's *not* paying attention, but he's got his mind mostly elsewhere. "Have the doctors said anything?" he asks, and Kristin shakes her head, her smile turning apologetic. Tommy sighs, and he winces at the familiar feeling of his wrists going a bit stiff. "I'm gonna go wash my hands."

Another part of his new routine. Tommy closes and locks the bathroom door behind him and turns the faucet on. Since Tommy isn't *using* any of his webs, they can get backed up. So he empties them into the toilet, rubbing at the pulse points of his wrists once he's pretty certain they're manageable again. It's not as if he can do anything else with his webs.

Once, when he'd been back at the house, he'd tried to put his mask back on. It hadn't exactly gone *well*. He'd ended up struggling to breathe, trying hard not to vomit at the memory of blood, smeared and sticky, on the inside of the fabric. Logically, he'd known that Techno had washed his suit and gotten rid of Phil's blood-except for the hoodie, which had still ended up stained a sickening light pink; Tubbo's given him a new one-but it had still felt *real*.

So it might take him a while to get back in the proverbial saddle again.

Tommy flushes the webs down and washes his hands. That way, he hasn't *technically* lied to Kristin. He heads back into the room, slightly surprised to find Wilbur already there, guitar propped in its case in the corner and various items strewn haphazardly about the room. He's discussing something quietly with Kristin.

They both look upset.

When Tommy clears his throat, they turn to face him, and Wilbur gives him a wave. "Hey, Toms, how's your morning been?" he asks, and Tommy just shrugs. It's not great, but it's not terrible, either. Wilbur turns back to Kristin, brows furrowed. "Are you seriously considering going back?"

"I'm not *considering* it, Wil, I *have* to," Kristin tells him, sounding rather exasperated, and Tommy sits down next to Phil. He reaches for Phil's hand, toying idly with the cord of the pulse oximeter. That's what the nurses had told him it's called, anyway. Kristin sighs. "I've used up all my vacation days, they *need* my research, Wil, it's not like I want to go back, I-"

"No, no, I get it, you're just gonna go back and leave Dad and Tommy to one of us," Wilbur says, slightly heated, and Kristin bristles a bit at that. Tommy just keeps his attention on Phil's fingers. They haven't moved, but maybe there'll be a sign of consciousness soon. Tommy's been reading articles about coma patients on his phone, and most people say that the fingers and the hands are the first to move. External nerves and all that. Wilbur's footsteps start up rhythmically. He's pacing. "You know what? Go. You might as well, it's not like anything's more important than *work*."

"Wilbur, I have to pay the bills *somehow*," Kristin says, and Tommy gently inspects the IV. It's not been shifted, which is good. It had gotten dislodged the other day. "Besides, I'm coming back every chance I can get. Tommy needs to get back to school at some point, as I'm sure you do too. It's been a *week*, Wil. I can't just... sit here and do nothing."

Tommy adjusts one of Phil's pillows. "They were fighting about this in the hallway the other day, Dad," he murmurs as Wilbur's pacing gets more frantic. Phil doesn't respond. "There's only half a week left of school anyway, dunno what difference going back would make. Wilbur seems pretty determined not to go."

Kristin sighs. "Wil, stop pacing, sit down and have some coffee," she says, sounding tired, and Tommy stands to fix a cup for Wilbur. It's good to have something to do.

But Wilbur doesn't stop pacing, not even as he watches Tommy move over to the little rolling table to add some cream and sugar to one of the cups of coffee. "You seriously expect us all to just-to fuckin' go back to *normal*?" he asks, incredulous. Tommy's hands are shaky as he pours one, two, three packets of sugar into the plastic hospital cup. Wilbur kicks something half-heartedly. Likely a chair. "Well, excuse *me* if I can't just up and forget about my father being in the hospital."

"No one is *forgetting* about it. Techno's taking his finals, which I imagine is *incredibly* stressful on top of everything that's happened, and I have to get back to the office. There are projects-people-that are relying on me there too, Wilbur," Kristin says. "I think it's great that Quackity is giving you all the time you need. But there are projects, confidential ones, all *kinds* of things that require me to be in my office physically. Believe me, I *tried* to negotiate a remote working deal, but... it's just not possible. Tommy needs to get back to school, he needs some kind of routine, he needs to go to therapy, he needs *something* to help him cope."

Tommy's trying very hard not to listen, but the last place he wants to be is anywhere other than here. "I don't want to go back," he says quietly, and Wilbur gestures wildly to him, as if his point's been proven. "But Mum's right, Wil. If she has to go to work, she has to

work. Why would she *want* to leave?"

Kristin rubs at her temples. "I'm sorry we keep fighting about this in front of you," she says, and Tommy just shrugs. He's been doing that a lot today. He wonders if Phil's cold. Maybe he should ask the nurses if Phil can have another blanket. Kristin puts a hand on Wilbur's arm. He doesn't shrug it off, Tommy notices, which is better than yesterday. "I'll be back as much as I possibly can. And if Tommy's not going back..."

"I'll take care of it," Wilbur assures her, posture softened, and Tommy smiles to himself as he turns one of the roses in the vase to face front. "Quackity and the rest are coming by after school's out, I can talk to him about getting Tommy exempt from final exams."

That's pretty nice. Tommy hadn't even thought about finals. He wonders how they're going for Tubbo and Ranboo. Tubbo's come to visit a couple times, but Tommy hasn't seen Ranboo in a while. Kristin comes to press a light kiss atop his head. "I'll be back after work," she promises, and Tommy nods. She gives Wilbur a brief hug before she leaves, and the hospital room is silent again, save for the steady beeping of the machines.

Tommy's not usually one to break the silence, not when Wilbur's in the room-he's been trying to distance himself, even if that's hard-but he's made it a habit to talk to Phil in the mornings, just in case he can hear him. "They've restocked the maltesers in the vending machines, Dad," he says, tucking Phil in just a bit. Wilbur looks startled to hear him speaking unprompted. "They've also got that healthy junk that you keep trying to get me to eat. The breakfast bars aren't bad, but they're too sweet, y'know?"

"Tommy?" Wilbur asks, puzzled, and Tommy ignores him, moving around the room to grab some scones and some of the other bits of breakfast that Kristin had left for them to set them on Phil's bedside table. At that, Wilbur's face falls. "Toms-"

"I know you're still sleeping, but this is just in case you're hungry when you wake up. Well, most of it's for me, but you knew that," Tommy says, buttering one of the scones and putting jam on the other. He takes a few bites of the buttered one and sips his now-cold

coffee. "That one nurse-my personal favorite, she reminds me of Puffy a little, you'd love her, Dad-she came by and joked about me wasting food, but I don't think it's a waste. After all, you're gonna be *starving* when you wake up, so I might as well keep food out for you, just in case it happens when I'm asleep. No pressure or anything, but it's been a while, Dad."

There's a strangled sound from somewhere over by where Wilbur's sitting, and Tommy takes another sip of his cold coffee. He pats Phil's shoulder gently. Wilbur comes to sit beside him, nervously wringing his hands in his lap. "Tommy, do you want to talk about-"

"Christmas is coming up, Dad," Tommy says, swallowing around the lump in his throat, and Wilbur falls silent again. "You know, I actually got you your present a while back-well, no point in spoiling what it is, because surely you'll be awake by then. But it's really nice! I made it myself. I guess I could give you a hint-a really broad one, I don't want to give too much away, y'know? I'd like it to still be a *little* bit of a surprise. So, remember how I was learning to sew?"

"You were?" Wilbur asks, and Tommy pointedly refuses to look at him.

"I figured I could make you something-probably means more than some generic 'Number One Dad' mug, right?" he jokes. Phil doesn't laugh. He doesn't even move. Tommy points at the scone and raises his brows. "You gonna eat that? Not gonna lie, I might steal it from you."

Phil's still silent.

"Tommy," Wilbur starts, uneasy, "I don't know if this is your way of coping, but-"

"It's alright, Dad, I can just get you another one later," Tommy says, a little strained, and Wilbur gives him a worried look. Tommy pretends not to notice. "They won't have fresh ones until noon, but that's fine. Oh, and guess what? They finished your building! Isn't that great? You're gonna have to give me a tour once you're out of the hospital, okay? It'll be just like the buildings you used to show me when I was a kid, remember? You'd put me on your shoulders

and then you'd take me to go see all the places you worked on. It's gonna be just like that! A-And then we'll go home, and everything will be okay, you just-you have to wake up, okay, Dad? You just have to wake up! That's all, it's not hard, you're-the doctors say you're recovering really well, so... so why's it taking so long for you to wake up? I-I don't get it, you're supposed to-why won't you *talk* to me?!"

"Tommy!" Wilbur says, panicked as he puts a hand on Tommy's shoulder. Tommy hangs his head as his shoulders shake, and he tries to wipe away the tears streaming down his cheeks as quickly as he can. He can't let Wilbur comfort him, can't let Wilbur see that he's guilty, that it's all his fault. Tommy glances up at him, and Wilbur immediately tugs him into a hug that Tommy wouldn't have been able to avoid even if he'd tried. "I've got you, you're okay."

Tommy's breath catches in his throat, and he brings his hands up to cling at Wilbur's back. So much for distancing himself. "Why won't he talk to me, Wil?" he asks, voice breaking, and Wilbur just holds him tighter. "Why won't he wake up?"

"I don't know," Wilbur whispers, "I'm sorry."

Niki is the first to arrive, with a massive tray of baked goods that she hands to Tommy. "Hey, Tommy, how're you feeling?" she asks, and Tommy gives her a weak smile. It's really nice of her to bring these, but his appetite hasn't exactly been around. Not since this morning, at least. She gives Wilbur a wave. "Good to see you, Wil. You guys holding up okay?"

"We're managing," Wilbur says, and Niki gives him a sympathetic look. Tommy sets the tray down on the rolling table, grabbing one of the cookies and taking a small bite. It's not too sweet, which is nice. Wilbur gestures to Phil. "You can say hi if you'd like, but I don't think you'd get much of a response."

Niki huffs out a half-laugh and moves to Tommy's side, pointing out one of the pastries. "I know you're not a fan of overly-sweet things, so I made some special for you. They've barely got any sugar," she

tells him, and Tommy smiles gratefully, setting the cookie back down and taking one of the pastries. *Fuck*, that's good. Niki smiles and claps him on the back lightly. "Glad you like 'em, Toms. Oh, and Sally should be getting here with Sam any minute now."

"Thank God," Wilbur says, "I've missed her."

"What am I, dead meat?" Sam asks from the doorway, and Tommy perks up. Sam grins at him and makes his way over, taking one of the cookies as he ruffles Tommy's hair. "Good to see you, kiddo."

"Hey, Wil," Sally says softly, gently squeezing Wilbur's hand, and Tommy scarfs down a second pastry. Niki starts to tidy up the room, and Sam pulls out his phone to play some quiet instrumentals. The music's quite nice, actually; it's better than the bullshit they play in the elevators here. Sally ushers Wilbur into a chair and does the same to Tommy. "Sit, relax, we'll take care of things. Let me get you boys some coffee."

Tommy blinks in a numb sort of surprise, but he doesn't protest. Sam starts to string some lights around the room, carefully navigating around the machinery. When Tommy gives him an inquisitive look, Sam grins sheepishly. "I checked with the staff, they said it was fine," he says, turning off the overhead fluorescent lights and opening something on his phone. He taps once, then scrolls, and the lights he'd strung around the room glow a gentle yellow. "Made the app myself. Figured it'd be less grating for you guys."

Tommy *does* like this lighting much better. He has the fleeting idea to ask Phil what he thinks, only to be reminded with a pang to his chest that he can't. "It looks great, Sam," Wilbur says, smiling softly. He looks much less drained. "Thank you."

Niki's humming along to the instrumental, gathering up wrappers and plastic bottles, folding jumpers and hoodies. "You don't have to clean, Niki, it's fine. Honestly," Tommy says, and she tuts at him, tossing a rather brightly colored jumper in his direction. It's definitely not one of his. Idly, he wonders if Niki had gotten it just for him.

Sally returns with a tray full of coffees, handing some out to Sam and Niki before setting the others down and making them-

presumably-just how she and Wilbur like it. Tommy just shakes his head when she offers him one.

“Aye, where’s my favorite kid?” Quackity asks from the doorway, and Tommy hesitantly raises his hand. Quackity grins and bustles in, Charlie and Karl not following far behind. God, this is fucking weird.

On one hand, Tommy wants to be furious with Quackity. He wants to throttle him, scream at him, berate him for doing the shit he’s done and having the *audacity* to show up and pretend like he cares about any of them. He wants to give Quackity a taste of his own medicine, bash his ribs in, toss him through a brick wall, and see how *he* likes it. He wants to demand answers, to know why the *fuck* Quackity would willingly work with the monster that had put his dad in the hospital.

And on the other hand...

Tommy is tired.

He’s so tired. He’s too tired to be angry, too exhausted to be infuriated. There’s nothing he can say that won’t give away his identity, and it’s not as if Quackity’s ever been anything but wonderful to everyone but Spider-Man. Tommy doesn’t have it in him to protest, to yell about injustice and unfairness when the fire within him has been doused with the waters of guilt and grief. It’s too hard to feel something more than a numb kind of melancholy.

“Hey, Big Q,” he says, idly wondering if Quackity had brought his gauntlet with him somehow. It’s been a while since they’d fought; maybe Quackity’s too busy with arms dealings to face him head on. Quackity reaches up to ruffle his hair and hands him a slip of paper. “What’s this?”

“Your exemption for finals. Wilbur texted a while ago, but I already had it covered,” Quackity says with a proud grin. “Congrats on passing this term, Tommy! Of course, I’ll take care of any head boy responsibilities you’re *supposed* to have-end of term fundraisers and all that-so don’t worry about *anything*, okay? And if there’s something you need, whatever it might be, you just let me know.

Say the word, anything you want.”

“You’re... you’re head boy?” Wilbur asks, brows furrowed in confusion, and Tommy looks away, fiddling with the exemption paper. The idle chatter of the others grows silent. Wilbur steps closer, a hand running through his hair. “Wh-Tommy, why didn’t you tell us?”

Tommy shrugs. “I dunno,” he answers honestly, and Quackity tilts his head. Tommy shudders, wrapping his arms around himself and moving towards Phil. “I just didn’t think it was that big a deal, y’know?”

“Of course it’s a big deal!” Wilbur says, and Tommy winces at the harsh tone. Wilbur takes a moment, presumably to calm down, and Sally whispers something to him—it sounds like *you didn’t know?* but Tommy’s not certain. Wilbur’s eyes scan his face for something. “That’s a really great accomplishment, Toms, I... why wouldn’t you want to tell us?”

Tommy’s shoulders hunch up to his ears. “I don’t know, Wil, I-I just *didn’t*, okay?” he says, and Wilbur looks hurt.

“Is it something I did? Why—this is the first I’ve heard about it, is—Quackity, why wouldn’t *you* tell me?” Wilbur demands, and Quackity narrows his eyes.

Oh, this can’t be good.

Tommy’s apprehension must show on his face, because *Karl*, of all people, steps forward with his hands outstretched placatingly. “Let’s not get into it, okay? Everyone’s more than a little stressed, and I’m pretty sure Tommy’s overwhelmed right now,” he says easily, and Tommy gives him a relieved smile. At least *one* of the school’s administrators isn’t a supervillain. “It’s not his fault, other things probably got in the way.”

Sam nods. “Yeah, man, only reason we knew about it was because Quackity wouldn’t stop bragging about how great Tommy is,” he says, and Niki grins.

"You should hear him, Wil," she says, "he's so *fond*."

Tommy really doesn't know how to feel about it. He wants to be happy that Quackity is, presumably, proud of him, but... Quackity's a fucking supervillan. Sure, Quackity's a great headmaster, and he's passionate about making every student of his feel heard and appreciated, and he's especially good about getting resources to the kids that need them. But he can't feel happy about Quackity's approval without feeling immensely guilty. Who *knows* how many people Quackity, Charlie, and Fundy have hurt?

Hell, even The Sense doesn't seem to know how to feel. It's always *slightly* on edge around Quackity, but it never *really* warns him unless he's actually physically fighting him. The Sense trusts Quackity somewhat; Tommy supposes that already having trust in the guy beforehand doesn't hurt.

Well, actually, it makes the whole betrayal thing hurt a lot more, but that's not the point.

Quackity grins and shrugs sheepishly. "What can I say? He's like the little brother I never had," he says, and now Tommy's *really* confused. Quackity's brows furrow, and he looks over towards Phil. "Charlie, what the fuck are you doing?"

"Oh! Don't worry, I'm really good at talking to unconscious people," Charlie says, and Tommy makes a face. Clearly, everyone else is just as confused. Charlie beams at all of them. "I talk to you while you're asleep all the time, Quackity from the front office!"

Quackity blinks. "I live alone," he says, slightly dazed, and Charlie nods.

"I'll talk to Phil from the Watson household, and who knows? Maybe he'll wake up!" he says, genuinely cheerful, and Tommy's face falls. Niki comes to put a hand on his shoulder, and Sam rubs his back. Charlie tilts his head, confused. "Sorry, did I... did I say something wrong?"

A sad smile on his face, Quackity gently guides Charlie away from Phil's unmoving form. "That's not how it works, buddy," he says

softly, and Charlie gives Wilbur an apologetic look. Wilbur just waves dismissively and tucks himself closer to Sally's side. Niki hands Tommy the coffee that Sally had brought in earlier. It's warm.

Karl takes Quackity by the hand and heads over to where Tommy's still standing between Niki and Sam. "Hey, we mean it, anything you need," Karl says, looking unusually worried, and Tommy just nods. "You always have someone in your corner, alright?"

Tommy smiles. "Thanks, Karl," he says, and Niki gives his shoulder a squeeze before heading over to sit by Wilbur and Sally. Karl nods, though he still looks worried, and he gives Quackity a meaningful look before nudging Sam towards the tray of ever-diminishing pastries. Tommy's left alone in front of Quackity, and he shifts uncomfortably. "Thanks. For stopping by, I mean. Y-You don't have to stay, it's pretty much just... sitting and waiting. Nothing interesting."

Quackity glances over towards Wilbur and frowns just a bit. "You know, I really do mean it when I say I think of you like a little brother," he says, and Tommy huffs out a sad half-laugh. What would Quackity say if he knew he was beating the ever-loving shit out of his 'little brother' every once in a while? Quackity seems to take that as Tommy not believing him, though, and he puts a hand on Tommy's arm. "I do. You're a good kid, and this shit? It's *rough*. I can't even imagine how hard this is for you, and all I want to do is make it better. But I know I can't do that, so I... I just want to be here for you. Whatever it is, I've got your back, okay?"

Tommy nods. "Yeah," he lies, "I know."

Quackity gives him a gentle smile and heads over to talk quietly with Karl, their fingers intertwined just slightly. Tommy turns to Sam, who comes over and takes something out of his bag. "It's got Animal Crossing downloaded and fully updated. DLC and everything," he says, handing the console to Tommy. "I know it's not gonna make this magically better, but it's something to take your mind off things. You can give it back whenever, I've got a spare at home."

"Thanks, man. I really appreciate it," Tommy says, and Sam grins. Niki nudges his coffee towards him again, and Tommy rolls his eyes,

taking a sip of it. It's... actually really good. "Did you put drugs in this? Why the fuck is it so good?"

"I put some hot cocoa mix in there. It's the dark chocolate kind, so it's not too sweet, not too bitter," Niki tells him, puffed up like a little bird that's really proud of its nest. Tommy chuckles and sips some more. "You know, if you or Wil ever need anything, we're just a call away."

Tommy nods. Niki and Sam are the best. She ruffles his hair and takes Sam over to where Wilbur's sitting. Tommy gets it; they're Wilbur's friends, after all. They're here for Wilbur, and they're nice enough to bring Tommy things and make him feel better too. He wishes Tubbo were here. Or Techno. Or Ranboo.

Aha! Techno's here. One for three. Not bad.

"Hey, I'm ba-oh. There's people here. Hullo," Techno says uncomfortably, setting his bag down on the last open chair. He shrugs his coat off as everyone throws greetings his way, and Sally hurries to get him some coffee. "Oh, uh, thanks. Is this-are we *allowed* to have this many people in the room?"

"No, but I convinced the nurses to fudge the rules a bit," Wilbur says, and Tommy snorts quietly, opening up Animal Crossing. He might as well put Sam's gift to use. Who knows? It might actually take his mind off things. Wilbur hums. "Toms, you wanna help Techno with his stuff?"

Tommy huffs. So much for getting a break. As he helps Techno unpack some textbooks, Techno nudges him. "Looks cozy in here," Techno mutters, nodding at the lights. Tommy smiles gently and leans against the wall. Techno weakly punches his shoulder as he gives Quackity a wary look. "So, uh... are they gonna be here for a while?"

"He hasn't done anything yet, I'm keeping my eye on him," Tommy mumbles, and Techno nods, keeping a steady hand on his umbrella. At that, Tommy's brows furrow. "Is it raining?"

He hasn't looked outside in a while, so he has no idea. Techno

shakes his head. "Snowing," he corrects, and Tommy's vaguely surprised by that. Considering it's December, he supposes it's not *that* outlandish. "You feelin' okay?"

"Everyone keeps asking me that," Tommy says, and Techno just shrugs, grabbing his Greek textbook. "You gonna study all day?"

"It would be easier if the room weren't so crowded, but I've got my Greek final tomorrow, man, I'm not taking chances," he says, and Tommy looks over at Wilbur and his group of friends. Niki's splitting a cookie with Sam, who's currently trying to explain something to Charlie, who keeps getting distracted by Sally's enthusiastic gestures as she argues with Quackity over something. Wilbur just seems happy to be there.

"Can I help you study?" Tommy asks, suddenly feeling quite overwhelmed, and Techno looks worried, but he nods anyway.

Techno shifts, like he wants to say something else, but he doesn't, instead moving his bag off of the chair and sitting down. "So, what you're gonna do is take this section of the questions and ask 'em in random order. I don't care about your pronunciation, I've been studying with a friend of mine who doesn't speak Greek, so I'll know what you mean anyway," Techno says.

"You have friends?" Tommy asks, and Techno shoves his head.

It almost feels normal.

Anybody see Tommy at the Spider-Man movie premiere? Those pictures are so funny lmao

i don't wanna be at all like me

Chapter 43: i don't wanna be at all like me

Tubbo and Ranboo come to visit.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Tommy has spent his morning scrolling through Twitter.

He knows he shouldn't, knows it's self-destructive, but he can't help it. It never ends well. It's either stan accounts getting into feuds with obvious bait accounts to try and defend his alter ego's honor, or it's people old enough to be a grandparent using Facebook infographics that are likely horrifically incorrect to smear his good name.

But Tommy hasn't caught up with the news in *ages*, and being so cooped up is starting to get to him. Just a little.

It's not as if he's planning on leaving anytime soon, *God* no. He'd never leave Phil here like this, even if Techno, Wilbur, and Kristin would be happy to take Tommy's place. Which is why he's currently scouring the Internet to seek out everyone's opinions about his absence. It's a perfectly normal and healthy reaction to have.

Sure, there's loads of criticism, mostly from Schlatt and his cult following, but mostly, people are just wondering where he is. They're concerned for him, which is a pretty nice change of pace for once. There's lots of speculation as well. People are saying he could've gone on holiday-Tommy particularly hates this one because it implies that even if Phil hadn't been the person in the accident, he'd be taking any kind of vacation after a horrible incident like that. Others are suggesting he'd been more injured than he'd seemed, and he's taking time to recuperate. But one question seems to be on

everyone's minds, regardless of whether or not they approve of him: *Where is Spider-Man?* It's a valid thing to wonder, after all; it's not like Tommy had held a fucking press conference to announce he'd be taking a break.

No, it was more of a viral clip of him momentarily breaking down on the street before Tubbo had come to get him that had given a little more context to the situation online.

Tommy's not proud of it, but it's not like he can take it back now. Tubbo's done all he can to get the video taken down, but once it's uploaded, it's there forever. The video is particularly haunting, looking back; Tommy had been so out of it, and it really shows in the video. He's just stumbling forward, hand clutched to his side-must've been an instinctual thing, his ribs *had* gotten pretty fucked up-and he'd been covered in Phil's blood. He looks like a shell of a person in that video. It's not a great look for a superhero.

It's also not a great look to be avoiding fights with villains-Slime had demolished a teahouse, Boss had robbed a bank with Blaze, and another murder heavily suspected to be Vos's doing had happened-but it's not as if Tommy can do anything about that. He still can't look at his mask without shaking. He can barely stand to look at the profile pictures of all of the stan accounts theorizing in regards to his whereabouts.

To his surprise, the trending tab not only has 'Where is Spider-Man?' listed, but 'Happy holidays, Spidey!' as well. Tommy's brow furrows as he taps on it, and it's positively flooding with well-wishes from a ton of people. Hell, even some *celebrities* are hopping on the bandwagon. It's so odd to see tweets from verified accounts telling him some variation of 'Enjoy the season, whatever you celebrate! We miss you! Happy holidays, Spidey!'

Well, his civilian approval rate must be through the *roof* if PR teams are making celebrities tweet this shit. Tommy had forgotten that it's so close to Christmas, though. He feels a little dumb for forgetting, but... his mind hasn't exactly been in the spirit of the season. He's had much more pressing things to worry about lately.

Tommy sits up, pocketing his phone as the door opens. To his

surprise, Tubbo and Ranboo are there, both with copious amounts of food. "Puffy wanted to make sure you got something other than hospital cafeteria shit," Tubbo explains, setting down the tupperwares and thermoses on the rolling table and bringing Tommy in for a brief hug.

Ranboo hands him a platter of brownies. "My mom helped me make them. Tubbo said you're not a fan of sweet stuff, so I was also gonna bring you chips, but I left them in Ms. Puffy's car by accident," he says with a sheepish smile, and Tommy huffs out a laugh. Ranboo looks around the room, and a flash of sadness crosses his features when his gaze passes over Phil. "So, um... are you here by yourself?"

"Mum got out of work a bit ago, she's on her way. Sally forcibly took Wilbur to have a shower and some proper meals. It'll be good for him," Tommy says dismissively, and Tubbo and Ranboo exchange a wary look. Tommy pours out a bit of soup from one of the thermoses and places it gently by Phil's bedside table. When Tubbo raises a brow at him, Tommy smiles sadly and pats Phil's hand. "Just in case he wakes up. So! How've you dickheads been?"

"School got out, which is nice," Tubbo says, hovering by Tommy's side as he goes about tidying up the room some. They've got guests, after all. "You seem to be doing, uh... well, you're functioning, which is better than the first couple of days, right?"

"I'm doing just fine, Big T, don't worry about me so much," Tommy tells him easily. He doesn't want to worry Tubbo. Really, Tubbo's got enough on his plate with controlling the social media unrest and *still* trying to get into the servers that have that Guided Evolution project locked up, so Tommy doesn't want to add any more stress.

Tubbo nudges Ranboo, and Ranboo takes something out of his pocket. "I got the three of us some movie tickets," he says hopefully, and sure enough, three ticket stubs are in his hand; the showing is so *soon*, though. Ranboo offers one to Tommy. Tommy doesn't take it, and Ranboo looks at Tubbo again, handing him the other two tickets. "I just thought... it could be nice for you to get out of the hospital for a little while, y'know? Tubbo said he'd cover snacks, and I'm getting us some sodas, so you can get whatever you want! What

d'you say?"

Tommy glances down at the still-outstretched ticket and blinks. "Why would I need to get out of the hospital?" he asks, because Ranboo's not making any sense here. "I already leave to go have showers back at the house, I'm getting out plenty."

With a sigh, Tubbo crosses his arms. "That's... not what we mean by 'getting out,' Tommy, and you know it," he says, and Tommy narrows his eyes. What the hell is Tubbo getting at? "It'll be good for you to think about something else, even if it's just for an hour or two."

"Sam gave me Animal Crossing for that, though, that's not... I've been playing it loads, Tubbo, I don't need a different distraction," Tommy says, slightly irate, because *seriously*, Tubbo's not making any damn sense here. "I'm not fuckin' pent up or some shit, but I can't just leave Dad here all by himself, Tubbo—"

"But you're *not* leaving him by himself," Tubbo says, frustrated, but Tommy honestly has no fucking clue why he is. "He's got doctors and nurses, and your mum's coming as well! You deserve a break, Tommy! I mean, seriously, I'm not trying to pressure you, I'm just—I'm *worried*, okay?"

Tommy blinks at him, defensive posture slowly softening. "Why would you be worried? I'm fine, Tubbo, really, I... I am," he says, but Tubbo doesn't exactly look like he believes him. "Look, I don't know what you think I've been doing, but I-I've been productive! I have, really, I've been keeping things tidy, a-and I've been making sure Dad's pillows and sheets are all neat, and I've been making my island look nice, I've got *loads* of hours on it. I even helped Techno study a while ago! There's nothing to be worried about."

Ranboo shifts uncomfortably. "Tommy, I don't mean this in, like, a *rude* way, but you look... you look *awful*, man," he says, and Tommy stares at him. Sure, maybe Tommy doesn't exactly look red-carpet-ready right now, but he doesn't look *that* bad, does he? To be fair, he hasn't been able to bear looking at his reflection in the mirror for a while. Ranboo nods. "You've got really bad bags under your eyes, you look like you haven't been sleeping—which I can't exactly blame

you for, you haven't slept in an actual bed for a week or two now."

Tubbo nods. "Exactly! We just want to give you a break, let you have some fun," he says, and Ranboo offers the ticket up again. Tommy still doesn't take it, and Tubbo sighs, brows pinched together. "Puffy told me Kristin said you've missed your last couple of therapy appointments."

At that, Tommy scoffs in disbelief, taking a step back. "What...? I-I haven't *missed* them, I just haven't got the chance to go, I-I'm busy here, I *have* to be here," he insists, counting the beats of the heart rate monitor.

Stepping forward, Ranboo tilts his head. "Tommy, we're not trying to..." he trails off. It sounds as if he's zoned out. When Tommy turns to look at him, Ranboo looks like he's kind of shut down, like if he were a robot and his power button had been pressed. Tubbo puts a hand on Ranboo's arm, concerned, and Ranboo suddenly stands up straight again, eyes glassy. "I'm gonna go. This is pointless."

He sounds weird. His tone is harsh. Ranboo's never harsh. Tommy and Tubbo stand in stunned silence as Ranboo turns and walks out the door. "I-I'm sure he didn't mean that," Tubbo stammers, still just as shocked as Tommy. "I don't know what's gotten into him, Tommy, I... I'm really sorry. But if you'd like, you can still come with us to the movie."

"Tubbo, I can't just-I have to stay here," Tommy tells him. "It's my fault that this happened, it's my fault Dad's like this, you have to understand-"

"But it's *not* your fault!" Tubbo protests, and Tommy shakes his head. It *is* his fault, it's obvious no matter how you spin it. But Tubbo seems determined to change his mind for some reason, grabbing him by the shoulders. "It's *not*. It's that green fucker's fault, Tommy, he's fucking insane! If it hadn't been Phil, it would've been someone else! Automata is a *villain*, he's a *monster*. Monsters don't take breaks, they don't have mercy, they don't even *care* that they're responsible for fucking-for *atrocities* like this!"

Tommy's bottom lip trembles, and he looks away. "What, just

because I care that it happened makes it not my fault?" he scoffs, blinking away the tears in the corners of his eyes. "I'm still the one who led him there, Tubbo, I'm still the one who didn't stop him in time-"

"And that's not your fault either! You can't possibly expect to anticipate every move he makes, even with that sense of yours," Tubbo tells him. Tommy wants to concede the point, but the guilt just keeps tugging at his stomach. He can't *stop* feeling guilty. If *he's* not feeling responsible for what had happened, who will? It's not as if Automata will go on record apologizing for having wrecked the building. Tommy's tugged out of his thoughts by Tubbo's hands on his face, squishing his cheeks until Tommy's sputtering out a weak laugh. "Look, feel as badly as you want for it, but that can't change anything about what actually happened. It's Automata's fault, no matter what Schlatt claims on Twitter, alright?"

Tommy nods. "I still... I'm not going to leave the hospital. Not yet," he says, and Tubbo nods, not quite satisfied and not quite dissatisfied. Tommy steps back and smiles gently. "Thanks, Tubs. I might feel up to it after Dad finally wakes up, but... for now, it's a rain check."

"Yeah," Tubbo says easily, "we can put a pin in it."

Shuffling awkwardly, Tommy glances at Phil. "I, um... I think you should go see that movie, though. Sally said she's taking Wil to that one later too, it's supposed to be really good," he says, and Tubbo seems surprised as he nods. "I'm not the only one who needs a break, y'know. I don't doubt for a second you've been losing sleep over the whole 'Guided Evolution' thing."

Tubbo snorts. "You'd be right about that," he says, and Tommy punches his shoulder playfully. It's more of a weak tap, but still. The gesture's there. The timid sense of normalcy is ever-present. Tubbo narrows his eyes. "The *second* you need me, you call me, got it? You can't use the excuse of not wanting to interrupt my finals anymore."

Groaning dramatically, Tommy throws his head back. "Ugh, *fine*, stop being clingy," he says, and Tubbo flips him off. Tommy gives

him a gentle smile, a more real smile. “Go, enjoy the movie. I can manage just fine. You can even be a bitch and spoil it for me like you always do.”

Tubbo gasps in mock-offense. “I would never-yeah, I’m texting you a synopsis as soon as I’m out of the theater,” he says with a shit-eating grin, and Tommy laughs. This is so fucking nice, it’s so refreshing. He feels so much less tired now. Tubbo knocks his knuckles against Tommy’s shoulder. “I’ll see you soon, Spidey.”

“See you soon, Hive,” Tommy says, beaming.

Tubbo copies Tommy’s two-fingered salute as he leaves the room, and Tommy settles back in one of the chairs, taking out Sam’s Switch and opening Animal Crossing back up again. He’s got shit to sell, after all. Gotta pay off those debts.

It’s actually a really helpful distraction, all things considered. Tommy’s been trying to recreate their house in the game, and so far, he’s shit out of luck with the shit furniture choices the store’s been giving him. But it’s a project to do, something to complete, a way to spend the time without feeling like he’s wasting it. Maybe it’s a false sense of escapism, but Tommy will take what he can get. He’s not about to be picky in regards to the very few scraps of genuine happiness he’s got right now.

As he tries on a stupid pair of glasses that reminds him of Wilbur’s in the Able Sisters’ shop, his wrist starts buzzing. That’s odd. Last time he checked, even *with* superpowers, his wrist doesn’t buzz. He realizes that in the constant chaos of his life, he’d never taken off that novelty bracelet Foolish had gotten him and Ranboo and Tubbo for Halloween. Weird, it must be on the fritz.

The Sense seems to disagree.

The Sense is frantically tugging at the back of his head, but there’s no immediate danger, so Tommy wonders what the hell it’s on about. The Sense chirps indignantly, and Tommy winces at the way his skull pounds. His hair’s on end, but only at the back of his neck

and on the same arm that the bracelet's on. He blinks in surprise and glances down at the bracelet, which is still frantically buzzing.

Tommy thinks that if The Sense had a head, it would be nodding frantically right now. At least, that's the vibe it's giving off at the moment. Tommy wonders if Tubbo had somehow gotten into trouble immediately after leaving the hospital, but if that were the case, he wouldn't be using the *bracelet*. Tommy doesn't think he's seen him wear it since Halloween. So that means...

Ranboo!

Oh, *fuck*.

Tommy scrambles to turn the Switch off and tuck it into a drawer, pulling a jacket on. But no, that's stupid, how's he going to be able to do anything to protect Ranboo like this? The Sense is pulling at the back of his head at the same frequency as the bracelet buzzes, and Tommy looks over to the duffel that's got his suit tucked at the bottom. No, he can't do that, that's absurd. He can hardly fucking *look* at the damn thing. But Ranboo's in danger.

"You can't save everybody, Toms."

Phil's words echo in his mind, and Tommy has to take a second to catch his breath. No, no, that's not right. Well, maybe it *is*, but surely, *surely* Tommy can save Ranboo. Ranboo's calling for help, he needs someone to help him, and Tommy's just standing here, paralyzed by the same fear that had been struck in him when he watched the building collapse around Phil.

But you know what?

Fuck fear.

Ranboo needs help.

Ranboo needs *Spider-Man*.

Tommy rips open the duffel and changes into his suit, swallowing around the lump in his throat as he tugs his mask over his face. There's no blood in it. There's no blood. Ranboo needs him, and

Tommy clammers out the hospital window and swings out into the city, looking down at his phone. Ranboo had shared his location to the group text; he's halfway across the city, for some fucking reason, which means that even if Tubbo's on his way, he's not going to get there in time.

It's a damn good thing that Tommy knows this city like the back of his goddamn hand. He swings, fast and efficient as he takes shortcuts and dips low to the street, ignoring the clamoring on the pavement. He's almost there. He's so close to where Ranboo is. It's an alleyway, because of fucking course it is, and Tommy drops down in front of Ranboo's terrified form.

There's two guys. One has a knife. "Fuck, you didn't say the spider guy was back!" the one without the knife whispers, panicked, and Tommy tilts his head. "We're fuckin' screwed!"

Well, they're right about *that*. "Good afternoon, gentlemen," Tommy says, stretching his arms above his head. "Geez, hope I'm not too rusty. It's been a while, y'know? I'm hoping this makes for a good warmup. Go on then, gents, give us a challenge!"

The one with the knife lunges at him, and Tommy deftly grabs his arm and twists it behind his back, webbing it to keep it there and sweeping his legs out from under him. The other one swings at him. "You son of a bitch-!" he's abruptly cut off by the web Tommy fires at his mouth.

"Hey, dickhead, watch what you say about my mum," he warns, and he swiftly kicks the guy into a pile of bin bags. He rolls his shoulders. Well, that wasn't too hard. He webs up the guy's unconscious form-unconscious like Phil, who's still in the hospital; Tommy shudders-and he turns to Ranboo, hands on his hips. "This part of town's dangerous, y'know. You oughta get home."

Ranboo, who had been clutching to his bag like a lifeline, blinks rapidly at him. "I-I don't even know where I am," he says, and now Tommy's confused. Ranboo shakes his head. "I was just at the hospital, I-I was with my friend, his dad's in a coma, we were trying to get him to come to the movies with us, I... I don't know how I got here."

Gently putting a hand on Ranboo's shoulder, Tommy checks him for injuries. He looks fine, but he's definitely too shaken up to meet Tubbo at the movies. "Hey, it's okay, I can help you get back home," he says softly, and Ranboo's brows furrow.

"How am I supposed to trust you to do that? You couldn't even get my friend's dad out of a building," he says, voice still shaky, and Tommy steps back, shoulders hunched up by his ears. He *knew* it. He *knew* they all think it's his fault. He fucking *knew* it. Before he can stop himself, Tommy's leaning against the wall of the alley, trying to catch his breath. Ranboo seems shocked, and he hesitantly reaches a hand out and lets it hang in the air. "I-I didn't mean that, I'm sorry, I'm just *scared* and I don't know what's *wrong* with me today, I... I didn't mean that, Spider-Man, I know it's not your fault."

"But it *is*," Tommy says breathlessly, wrapping his arms around himself. Ranboo shifts uncomfortably. "It's my fault. The city-everyone's safety-it's my responsibility, a-and I failed, I... shit, fuck, I'm sorry, just-just give me a second a-and I'll help you get back home, I-I just need a minute."

Ranboo watches with wide eyes as Tommy tries hard to steady his breathing. He's just gotta use the counts, he's just gotta do what Bad had taught him. Ranboo starts to mutter. "Oh *no*, Spider-Man's having a panic attack-is that because of...? Did *I* give Spider-Man a panic attack? Oh my God, I gave Spider-Man a panic attack," he yelps, and Tommy waves him off. "Are you okay? Did you-is there something I can do?"

Tommy shakes his head and takes a shaky deep breath. "It's fine, it's fine, I'm fine. You didn't-don't worry about it, I'm just-I'm really sorry. A-About your friend's dad," Tommy says, and Ranboo nods, pale as hell and clearly nervous. "I-I don't have some big hero speech prepared about the greater good if... if that's what you're worried about. I feel like shit, all the time, and I'm *this* close to unraveling, but I know I have to keep being who I *am*, because if *I'm* not protecting the city, no one will, a-and I can't just leave it in the hands of a bunch of crazy supervillains, I-I *care* too much! I wish I could *stop* caring, I *want* to stop caring, I-I want to leave everything behind and just go back to being a normal fucking kid, but I *can't*! That's not *me*! I *have* to be brave, I *have* to fix things a-and clean up

messes, because what the fuck *else* am I here for, then?! What am I even worth?! A hero that can't even fucking save *himself*? What a fucking *joke*."

Ranboo stares at him in shocked silence. Tommy abruptly snaps his mouth shut. Shit. He hadn't meant for things to spill over that much. After a moment of awkward staring, Ranboo clears his throat. "How-how old are you again?" he asks, voice cracking.

"Um. I'm seventeen," Tommy answers meekly, and Ranboo's shoulders slump.

"I thought you were, like, an *adult*, man," he says, and Tommy just shrugs, still keeping his arms around himself. Ranboo starts to pace again. "You're a *kid*, like I am, like Tubbo is, like *Tommy* is, oh, *God*! Dude, if I were you, I'd've snapped, like *weeks* ago! A-And what you said, is that... that's really how you feel? That's *so much pressure*, I... I had no idea-

"And that's the way I prefer to keep it, because there's no reason for you to worry! You're a civilian, I-I don't need you worrying about anyone but yourself and your own safety," Tommy tells him, and Ranboo gives him an incredulous look. Tommy shakes his head-shakes the thoughts and self-doubt off-and he offers up a hand. "Here, I'll get you home."

Ranboo's brows furrow. "Do you have anyone? I mean, I'm assuming Tubbo doesn't know who you actually are, and I can't imagine any *decent* parents would knowingly let their kid run around being a superhero, so-do you have anyone to talk to? Anyone that... that cares where you are, worries for you, knows what's been happening to you?" he asks, seeming rather conflicted, and Tommy wonders why Ranboo's so concerned.

"Yeah, I-I've got... I've got a few people," he says, swallowing when he remembers that, technically speaking, one of the people that *does* know is currently in a coma. "I really wanna make sure you get back safe, man, this part of town is really bad. Let me just give you a ride back, okay? Besides, any friend of Tubbo's is a friend of mine."

Ranboo looks down at Tommy's still-outstretched hand, then back

up at him. "You're gonna-what, you're gonna *swing* me back home?" he asks, as if that's some insane, outlandish concept, and Tommy gives him a flat look. It probably translates on his mask, because Ranboo sighs and takes his hand. "Alright, fine, but you're liable if this results in my death."

Tommy wraps one arm around Ranboo's middle and fires a web off, making sure it's secure before nodding at him. "Hold on tight," he says, and he can't help but grin. Ranboo, still wary, probably because he's taller than Tommy is, wraps his arms around Tommy's shoulders. "You ready?"

"Yeah, dude, just go-AH!" Ranboo lets out a scream as Tommy tugs the both of them into the air, and Tommy laughs good-naturedly as Ranboo clings to him like a koala. His hands have practically turned to claws, clutching to Tommy's hoodie for dear life as Tommy swings them through the streets. "Oh my God, oh Jesus, oh God, *what the hell?!*"

As Tommy dips lower to the street, Ranboo screams, squeezing his eyes shut and clinging even tighter to Tommy. Tommy lets out another laugh at the way Ranboo's hair is going practically every direction at once. "Isn't this fun?" he asks, and Ranboo briefly opens his eyes to glare at Tommy before going back to screaming. Feigning ignorance, Tommy nods in the direction of Ranboo's house. Not that Ranboo sees him, of course. "You live in the same neighborhood as Tubbo?"

Ranboo shakes his head. "No! Well, kinda! I live nearb-lookout for the *tree!*" he shouts, hunching down as Tommy swings them below a branch. Tommy thinks he's being rather dramatic, all things considered. This could be a much more bumpy commute. Ranboo punches his chest lightly before shifting back into koala mode. "Don't *do* that!"

"Chances are you're only gonna get one of these, I'm trying to make it *interesting*," Tommy teases, and Ranboo cries out in alarm as Tommy cuts a pretty close corner around a skyscraper and grazes them above a theater sign. Ranboo starts muttering something-he's either praying or putting a curse on Tommy-and Tommy tightens his grip on Ranboo's middle. "You're alright, I've got you. I'm not gonna

let you fall.”

“I know that,” Ranboo hisses through his teeth, “but this is still *insane!*”

Tommy whoops as they make a particularly fast swing by a good few office buildings, and he starts to slow as they get closer to the neighborhood. He decides it’s probably better-and will likely make Ranboo less suspicious and-slash-or creeped out-if he drops him off closer to here than his actual house.

Gently lowering them to the ground, Tommy clears his throat. Ranboo has not moved, still practically attached to his side. “We’re on the ground, mate, you can let go now,” Tommy tells him, and Ranboo blinks, slowly but surely stepping away from Tommy. His legs are basically Jell-o; Tommy has to stifle a laugh. “You alright?”

Ranboo swallows and nods. “Yeah, just... shaky. That was wild,” he says, and Tommy snorts, pointing up at Ranboo’s disastrous hair. Ranboo makes a face. “Aw, man.”

Chuckling nervously as he sees some pedestrians start to take their phones out, Tommy claps Ranboo on the shoulder. “Well, get home safe, okay? Try and stay away from that part of town, but if you ever find yourself in danger again, you can always count on me,” Tommy says firmly, shoulders square. He means it; he’s never letting anyone he cares about get hurt again, not if he can help it. “I’m... I’m sorry I couldn’t help your friend’s dad more. I’m gonna make sure that doesn’t happen to anyone ever again, I swear. There’s no excuse for my absence, but I’m back for good, and I’m sorry I wasn’t back sooner.”

Ranboo puts both hands on Tommy’s shoulders, gaze determined and eyes shining. “I would die for you,” he says, completely seriously, and Tommy blinks. He’d thought Ranboo couldn’t stand his alter ego. This is definitely... new. “You’re a traumatized kid doing your best. I see you, and I *appreciate* you.”

Tommy laughs nervously. “Whatever you say, but please don’t die on my behalf,” he says, and Ranboo nods.

"You can't die either, okay? The city... we all need you, man. N-Not to contribute to the pressure or anything, I'm not saying you can't take breaks, I'm-you get it," Ranboo says, and Tommy snorts. Ranboo hesitates for another moment, awkwardly shifting in place. "You better get home safe too, okay?"

A little surprised at that-no one's ever told him to come home safe except for the people that know his identity-Tommy smiles. "Yeah, man. I will," he says, and Ranboo seems content, giving Tommy a little wave before heading towards his house.

Tommy turns back to look at the city, then glances to his usual alleyway. He could just go home right now. He could go home and sleep in his actual bed, have a nap that doesn't have him waking up with a sore neck and a stiff back. He could have a meal that doesn't taste just a *bit* off, he could charge his phone without searching for an outlet that isn't already taken.

He could go home.

Tommy *wants* to go home.

He feels guilty for wanting it, of course, because Phil is still in the hospital, he still might wake up any minute now, and Tommy needs to be there, he needs to make sure Phil's okay, needs to know at every second of every day that Phil is still breathing. But he's so *tired*, and being Spider-Man today had been exhausting in and of itself, even if it had only been one thing, one crime, one problem out of a million solved. Maybe Tommy deserves a nap. Just one nap, and then he'll have whoever else is home drive him back to the hospital.

Tommy goes into his usual alleyway, moves the dumpster, and gets changed into clothes that had gone untouched for weeks. He gives Henry a light pat and tucks the bag back behind the dumpster, walking towards the house. Pushing the feeling of remorse down, for leaving Phil, even if he's not *really* leaving Phil, Tommy walks down his street, up the driveway, and opens the door, a shaky breath rattling his lungs as he steps into the hall.

Techno comes over to greet him, blinking in surprise. "Oh, hey, you

here to take a shower? I took one earlier, but I didn't use up all the hot water or anything," he says, and Tommy shakes his head.

"I'm, uh... I'm here to take a nap," Tommy says, and Techno's eyes go wide. Tommy starts to tear up a little, and he curls into himself slightly. "I-I know I should stay at the hospital, I'm just so *tired*, and-"

Techno abruptly cuts him off with a tight hug. "Nothin' to feel bad about," he says, "take your nap. You deserve it."

Ranboo: "How old are you?"

Tommy, unknowingly about to earn his undying loyalty: "Seventeen."

I hope y'all liked this chapter!!!

Also, if you've made any art for this fic or anything, put a link to it in the comments!! Like [this beautiful art of chapter 42](#) right here, go look at it!! It's absolutely wonderful :D

the results are in!

Chapter 44: the results are in!

The results of the election are here.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The last person Tommy had expected to see in the kitchen at seven in the morning is Sally, but here she is.

Well, to be fair, he also wouldn't have expected to see anyone outside their immediate family-and maybe Tubbo or Puffy-in the house at all. So seeing Sally casually sipping some tea in their kitchen, Wilbur nowhere to be found, is a bit odd. Tommy blinks, rubs the sleep out of his eyes, and blinks again.

Sally notices him, finally, and she smiles gently, pointing at a freshly brewed pot of coffee. "Good morning, coffee's ready," she says, and Tommy nods slowly. He grabs the biggest mug he can find and pours himself a cup. As he adds in some creamer, Sally hums. "Wil's out for a smoke, by the way. I told him not to, but I think he's too stressed to quit."

Tommy frowns. Then he takes in Sally's appearance. She's in one of Wilbur's jumpers, a borrowed pair of joggers, and her hair's not up like it's been the past couple of times he's seen her. "Did you sleep here?" Tommy asks, brows furrowed, and Sally nods. "Wh-okay, not to be rude, but *why*?"

Sliding Tommy the sugar bowl, which he promptly slides back, Sally hums. "I figured that with your mum being between the hospital and work, I could spare you and Techno from Wilbur's experimental cooking," she jokes, and Tommy laughs, still a little confused. "No,

seriously, I... I couldn't just, like, sit there while you guys were going through so much. I'm kinda hoping I can help out, whatever you guys need."

Tommy smiles at that. "That's awfully nice of you," he says, and Sally shrugs. She turns back towards the stove and stretches. Tommy shifts in place. "Uh... did you want any help with breakfast? Not like I've got many plans for this morning."

Sally beams at him and nods. "Yeah, that'd be great! Can you grab the eggs and-do you guys have bacon? Hm, maybe onions or ham, too, but definitely cheese," she says, and Tommy starts to grab the ingredients from the fridge, carefully stacking and balancing them until he gets back over to the counter. "I'm thinking omelets for breakfast-oh, and if you're still trying to build muscle, I'll add extra egg whites to yours."

Blinking in surprise, Tommy watches Sally start to crack the eggs-with one hand, what the actual fuck-and add them to a bowl, and she slides a cutting board towards him with her free hand. Tommy takes the onions and starts to chop them. "How'd you know I was building muscle?" he asks, and Sally raises a brow at him.

"Wil says all you eat is protein, but meat's not the only healthy source of that, y'know," she tells him, taking out another cutting board to dice the ham. She's much faster with the knife than Tommy is. The front door opens, and Tommy is affronted with the enhanced smell of cigarette smoke. He makes a face, but Sally brightens up as Wilbur enters the kitchen. "Hey, love, we're just making some breakfast."

"You got Tommy to cook?" Wilbur asks, incredulous, and Tommy sticks his tongue out at him as he goes back to trying his hand at cutting onions. Wilbur goes to kiss Sally, only for her to scrunch up her nose and lean away. Wilbur puts his hand over his chest in mock offense. "What was *that* for?"

"You stink of smoke, Wil," Sally tells him, shoving the ham to the side of her cutting board with her knife and grabbing the cheese grater from the cabinet. Tommy idly wonders how she knows where everything is. "Go brush your teeth or some shit."

Tommy snickers as Wilbur pouts, but he stalks off anyway. Sally grins to herself as she shreds the cheese and adds it to the eggs. Tommy nearly slips and cuts himself, but he manages not to slice his finger while he keeps trying to slice the onions. "What the fu-how do I do this?" he asks, exasperated. Every piece is a different size, and he's clearly not doing it right, can't make the tiny slivers that Sally can, can't even cut a fucking *onion* correctly.

A little alarmed, Sally sets her knife down and comes over to his end of the counter, a hand on his shoulder. "Hey, hey, no need to get upset, I didn't know you've never cut onions before," she says gently, and Tommy tries to ignore the embarrassed flush in his cheeks. He could always blame his teariness on the onions, but he's got a sneaking suspicion that Sally knows it's more than that. She puts a hand on his shoulder. "Do you want me to show you how to do it, or would you rather just pour the omelets and add the ham?"

"Can... can I just pour them?" Tommy asks, cursing the way his hands are so shaky. Sally takes the knife from him and nods, a sad smile on her face. Tommy goes to pour the eggs into the pan Sally had put out, and she chops up the onions with no effort. It's stupid for him to be getting so worked up over this; it's not like cutting onions is an end-all-be-all kind of skill, it's not like something so little is the end of the fucking world.

So why does it feel like it is?

Sally helps him put the bacon and the ham and the onions in, and she presses his mug back into his hands, fussing over him like he's worth being fussed over. "You're getting this first one," she tells him, and she clearly won't be taking no for an answer, given that she turns to add seasonings to it, effectively cutting off the conversation. Wilbur comes back into the kitchen, already having changed-Tommy can still smell the smoke on him, but it's quite obvious that Sally can't, given that she leans into him.

"Have they posted the election results yet?" Wilbur asks, and Sally shrugs. At Tommy's raised brows, Wilbur pulls his phone out and hands it over to Tommy as he pours himself a cup of coffee. It's open to a livestream of the BBC, and Tommy frowns. "The emergency mayoral race is going to be over. It's finally gonna be

done with.”

“Thank God for that,” Sally huffs, snatching Wilbur’s mug to steal a sip. Tommy snorts, though he’s still incredibly worried.

What happens if Schlatt wins? What happens when someone whose platform is basically built on fear-mongering over Tommy’s alter ego is put in charge? There’s no way he’d win, right? The people of London, they *like* Spider-Man, they wouldn’t just throw Tommy to the wolves like that, they wouldn’t elect anyone that threatens the sanctity of their friendly neighborhood-

“Are you *kidding* me?!” comes a shout from upstairs, and Tommy winces as Techno thunders down the stairs. Sally and Wilbur exchange a look. Techno looks *pissed*. Like, really pissed. Tommy’s not sure that he’s ever *seen* Techno so angry before. “They elected him! He actually won! Our pseudo-democracy is a *joke*.”

Oh, for *fuck*’s sakes.

There’s pounding on the front door, and then they’re all being rudely intruded upon by Tubbo, who slumps into a chair at the kitchen table, positively fuming. Techno gives him an approving nod, and Tubbo nods back. He pauses at Sally’s presence in the kitchen, but Tommy just waves dismissively, and Tubbo goes back to seething.

“I can’t *believe* that fucking-that absolute goddamn-that *prick*, that *wankstain* actually fucking won,” Tubbo says through gritted teeth, and Sally gives him a low whistle in sympathy before turning back to the omelets, plating one and handing it to Techno, much to Wilbur’s chagrin. “This fucking *dickhead* goes around spewing utter fucking *bullshit* about Spider-Man-”

“Oh, but Spider-Man’s lovely,” Sally says, and Tommy sits up a little straighter, allowing himself a bit of a smug smile at that. “We all know that, everyone loves that guy.”

Wilbur hums. “I mean, Quackity was saying that if Schlatt won, we’re probably getting a shitload more funding for the school, which is good,” he says, ever the mediator, but Techno and Tubbo are still furious. Wilbur gives Tommy a shrug. “I can’t stand the guy, but if it

means the school can give more opportunities and accommodations to kids that need them, I'm not about to complain."

Tubbo mutters a few swears under his breath as he scrolls through his phone, and Tommy gently tugs it out of his hands. "Stop overthinking so much, Big T. It'll work itself out," Tommy tells him, and Tubbo gives him an unsure hum, leg bouncing under the table. Techno is currently carving something into the table. "Uh... Tech? You alright?"

"There's no way he won that vote," Techno mutters, and Tubbo nods eagerly in agreement. Sally hands Tubbo an omelet and Wilbur makes a noise of protest. She just pokes his nose and gives him a flat stare. Techno's knife grating back into the table interrupts the moment. "Spider-Man's approval rate is through the *roof*, there's no way enough people voted for Schlatt to cancel that out."

"I know! It's fucking bullshit!" Tubbo says, and Wilbur gestures for them to keep their voices down. None of them know for certain whether or not Kristin had come home, but if she had, that means she's *really* in need of a full night of sleep. Tommy understands, probably more than the rest. Tubbo winces. "Shit, sorry. I'm just saying, it's not fucking *fair*, there's no way in hell he won, not when you factor in Spider-Man."

"People vote against their best interest all the time," Sally says idly, plating an omelet and handing it to Wilbur, who lifts it into the air, as if silently thanking the gods for breakfast, and Tommy smiles softly. At least Wilbur's not actively contributing to the conflict. Sally cuts the last omelet in half and gives one half to Tommy, keeping the other for herself. "Eat up, you look as though you haven't eaten in ages."

Wilbur, Techno, and Tubbo all blink at him as Tommy digs in.

"Whuh? Whu'ya lookin' at me for?" Tommy asks with his mouth full, and Techno's brows furrow. Tubbo's eyes scan his face, and Wilbur sits down in one of the chairs.

"But he's been eating, we've all watched him, he practically inhales food at the hospital," Wilbur says, and Techno nods.

"Yeah, Tommy eats plenty," he says, directing his statement at Sally, who narrows her eyes.

"Well, *clearly*," she says, settling in the seat next to Tommy and sliding him a plate of fruit, "he's not eating what he needs to in order to keep up with his metabolism. If all they have at the hospital is easy-to-burn carbs or empty sugars, it's not gonna keep his energy up. Tommy, you need to be eating some seriously hearty foods. I'm talking potatoes, red meats, potassium-rich foods, anything with saturated fats. Your metabolism is *crazy* fast, kid."

That's mostly because of his superpowered biology, but Tommy has to admit that she's got a point. He's always hungry, and if he eats as much as he wants to, he always feels like he's eating way too much. Techno's brows furrow. "They make you go into nutrition stuff in order to be a gym teacher?" he asks, and Sally shakes her head.

"Nah, but I teach kickboxing and softball in the summers. I get a lot of kids with fast metabolisms-beanpoles, the lot of 'em-and they all wanna build up the muscle necessary for the sport, so they need to know what to eat in order to encourage that," she explains, and Tubbo nods, vigorously typing something on his phone. Tommy wonders if he's writing down what Sally's saying or fighting with people on Twitter. It's anyone's guess, really. Sally gestures to him, and Tommy takes another few bites of the omelet. "Something like an omelet with greens and meat is gonna be way more filling for him than a salad or a bagel. I mean, seriously, he *looks* hungry."

"I'm eatin' all the time, though," Tommy says through a mouthful of ham, cheese, and egg, and Techno makes a face as he hands Tommy a napkin. Tommy wipes his mouth; they've got a guest, after all, he should try to be *somewhat* polite. "Do I really look that bad?"

"Not bad," Sally is quick to correct, "just hungry. Wouldn't hurt to get some junk food in you either, kid."

"Hear that? You're gonna have to share your stash with me," Tommy tells Tubbo, and Tubbo flips him off, brows still furrowed as he scrolls and taps vigorously on his phone. Techno moves over to the fridge, and as he lights the stove, Tommy perks up at the telltale sound of yet another package of bacon opening. "Is that-"

“For you? Yes, it is,” Techno tells him, “so sit back down and let Wilbur fix your hair. It’s a mess.”

Damn. Everything comes at a price these days, as it would seem.

Tommy skids against the asphalt, back banging into a car. He winces as he pushes a hand against his ribs, fairly certain they’re either bruised or broken, and he stands back up straight as Blaze sails in on one of his many drones, stepping down to bump his fist against Boss’s non-gauntlet hand. Teeth clenched as he stumbles forward, Tommy feels the sharp pain in his ribs slicing through him like a knife. He raises his fists again.

Boss-it’s Quackity, really, innit? Tommy should really stop trying to separate the two personas in his mind-lights up his gauntlet, and Tommy groans. “Oh my *fuck*, can’t you just shoot me instead?” he whines, dodging the incoming lightning strike as best as he can but getting zapped anyway, an uncomfortable shiver running through his body. Okay, so Quackity has *definitely* upped the voltage since their last fight.

“With *pleasure*,” Blaze snarls, snapping his fingers, and a shitload of drones come to circle him, all of them firing. Tommy prays that The Sense will be enough for him to dodge the incoming bullets. A few graze his arms, his legs, his sides, but none of them actually hit, which is really fucking good, because the last thing Tommy wants is to force Techno to do more makeshift stitches. “Wow, you’re actually getting kinda good at this! Let’s try a bullet *hail*.”

“C’mon, go easy on him, mi amor,” Quackity says, snark clear in his tone, along with genuine concern. Tommy’s brows furrow, and he starts to take the drones down one by one, even as they continue to fire. “Besides, Automata said we’d be rewarded *handsomely* if we’re the ones to take him in, and I don’t think he’d be too happy if we brought him in looking like Swiss cheese.”

Tired of this shit, Tommy webs one drone and swings it in a wide circle, knocking out as many of the other drones as he can. Quackity dashes forward, throwing a lightning-powered punch at him. Tommy

blocks it by grabbing it with both hands-a mistake, he knows it as soon as he realizes he's done it-and Blaze tackles him to the ground.

"Taste gunpowder, you little shit," Blaze hisses, firing off some kind of blast on Tommy's stomach, and Tommy cries out. He makes a mad grab at Blaze, gripping at the first thing he can reach, and he *yanks*. Blaze yelps as it's his hair that's tugged, and Tommy kicks at his chest, finally able to get Blaze off of him, only to be promptly swept up into the air by Quackity and his stupid superpowered boots.

"Fuck *off*," Tommy grunts, kicking and scratching at Quackity until he lets him go; not without a good electrified punch to the gut, but still. Tommy swings to the roof of the nearest building and pants, bringing a hand to the site of Blaze's mini-bomb. His gloves come away slick with blood, and Tommy whimpers quietly. *Blood, blood everywhere, blood all over him, Phil's blood all over him-*

Blaze's drones start shooting at him, and Tommy dives off the roof, swinging a kick into Quackity's chest with both feet. He lands in a crouch, breathing uneven, and he stumbles as he stands, fists still raised. "Well, well, well, look who's still standing," Blaze says, feigning admiration. Or maybe he's genuinely impressed, fuck if Tommy can tell. "Boss, why don't you take care of that?"

"On it!" Quackity shouts, and Tommy falls to his hands and knees as his body is wracked with electricity. "Ooh, looks like you're in pretty bad shape there, Spidey. Gonna run home, or have you finally given up?"

"Fuck you," Tommy grits out, trembling even as he stands again, fists violently shaking as he brings them back up.

Blaze snaps his fingers, and the drones still circling him align in front of him, akin to a firing squad. Tommy takes a deep breath and readies himself to dodge. "You're so *quiet* today, Spider-Man," Blaze taunts, and Tommy just keeps staring at him, chest heaving as he tries to ignore the dull throbbing of his wound. "I wonder, will filling you with lead make you louder?"

Quackity abruptly turns to Blaze, posture defensive. “Hey, man, that’s not what we agreed on-”

“I don’t give a *shit* what we agreed on,” Blaze snaps, and Quackity is visibly taken aback, “I want this brat out of my *way*.”

“Blaze, seriously, don’t fucking *shoot*,” Quackity insists, and Tommy takes the opportunity presented to him by their pointless bickering to lift a car above his head and chuck it at the drones, which promptly explode and blast the poor Honda to smithereens. Blaze and Quackity both turn to Tommy, and Tommy makes quick work of webbing up Blaze’s arms to his sides, nimbly dodging the lightning that Quackity sends his way. “Shit! Hang on, I’ll get you out-”

“No, you will *not*,” Tommy says firmly, webbing up Quackity’s gauntlet and aiming a kick at his chest. Quackity goes down, wincing, and Tommy stumbles forward, breathing heavily, and he coughs, eyes going unfocused for one terrifying moment. “Fuck, fuck... !”

Tommy leans against a nearby car-he’ll probably apologize for getting blood all over their door, but right now, he doesn’t really care about that-and he weakly tries to web up the drones currently cutting Blaze free. “Blaze! We need to retreat,” Quackity says, and Blaze gives him an incredulous look. “Get the blood sample and let’s *go*, we have to *go*.”

“Boss, what are you-”

“We’re *leaving*,” Quackity tells him, sounding more serious than Tommy’s ever heard him sound, and Tommy quickly scuffles back behind the car, applying some webs to the steadily bleeding wound in his stomach. “Blaze, seriously-”

“We have him *cornered*, I’m not fucking *leaving*,” Blaze insists, and Tommy groans as he lifts his arm to fire a web at a nearby building. “Shit, shit, he’s getting *away*-!”

Tommy cries out in pain as he swings up above the skyline, one hand clutching his stomach as he uses the other to swing himself towards his usual alleyway. “That was so fucking close,” he

whispers to himself, panicked as he fishes out his spare change of clothes from his duffel, "that was *too* close, they almost-fuck's sakes, get it together!"

He smacks his face lightly, willing the pounding in his heart to die down, even if it's just a little bit. The Sense thrums at the back of his mind, but not as a warning. It's a new sensation. It's a weird one. It's almost as if it's... comforting him? Well, only as much as a half-sentient sixth sense *can* comfort him, anyway.

It helps that he can look at Henry.

Tommy gets changed, making sure not to strain his abdomen too much. *Fuck*, this hurts. It shouldn't be *too* bad, though. Worst case, he ruins yet another sweatshirt and has to steal another one from Techno. He staggers home, slowly but surely, and he tries not to give anything away as he passes Sally and Wilbur and heads up the stairs.

He knocks on Techno's door, and Techno raises a brow at him as he opens it. "How bad is it?" he asks, and Tommy just laughs weakly. Techno lets him in and goes to the bathroom, presumably to get the first aid kit. Tommy takes his sweatshirt off and looks down at the wound. It's not *too* bad; definitely not the worst thing he's ever gone through, but it *is* pretty bad.

When Techno comes back in, the bottle of antiseptic in his hand clatters to the floor, and he stands in the doorway, totally shocked, until he snaps out of it and scoops the bottle back up, hurrying over. "It's not that bad, I-I think it just needs to be bandaged," Tommy says, and Techno's shoulders slump as he uses a nearby dagger of his to gingerly cut through Tommy's emergency webbing. Tommy resists the urge to gag. "S-See? Not that bad, just... just patch it up, I-I'll be fine."

"Tommy, this looks really bad," Techno admits, somewhat reluctantly, and he starts to gently scrub over the edges of the wound with the antiseptic-doused washcloth, wincing when Tommy does. "I know, kid, I know, it's gonna hurt. You're doin' great, okay? Just keep breathing, keep your breathing steady, that's it. Good job, Toms."

Tommy bites down hard on his bottom lip to keep from screaming as Techno gently pours antiseptic on the main horrible bit of the wound. His teeth draw blood, and Tommy chokes on the metallic taste of it. Techno looks up at him in concern, and Tommy waves dismissively, trying his hardest to keep smiling. "I'm alright, see? A-All good, Tech, I'm fine," he says, and he grimaces as Techno presses on the area around the wound, presumably to check for bruising that is definitely there. "Shit, shit, *shit-!*"

Tommy lets out a silent scream as Techno pours more antiseptic on the wound, squeezing the edge of the mattress so hard that he's pretty confident he's doing permanent damage to it. He starts to tear up, and he quickly wipes the tears from the corners of his eyes. Techno doesn't need to see him crying, Tommy doesn't *need* to cry. Techno's going to feel as though *he's* the reason Tommy's upset, and he's *not*, Tommy's just in a lot of pain right now. Not that he can tell Techno that, either, that'll just make him feel guilty for causing Tommy even more pain. Even if it's necessary.

Whimpering, Tommy's hands dig so hard into the mattress that he pokes holes in it, just as Techno is starting the stitches. "Oh, *crap*, did-did I hurt you? Here, here, let me start over," he says hurriedly, but Tommy slams a hand on his wrist as Techno moves to pull the beginning stitches out.

"Don't," he grits out, eyes determined, "I'm fine, you're not hurting me, it just-it's stinging still, the stitches are fine."

"Okay, okay, we can wait a minute 'til it dies back down," Techno reassures him, and Tommy doesn't have the heart to tell him that it won't. After a few beats of silence, Techno looks up at him, and Tommy nods firmly. Techno goes back to stitching up the wound; Tommy's lost count of how many scars he's gotten at this point, but he's probably been saved from loads more by Techno's impeccable stitchwork. Techno carefully ties the end of the thread and cuts it. "There you go. All patched up. Let me put some gauze on it in case."

"At this point, I'm more like the friendly neighborhood pincushion," Tommy jokes, and Techno looks at him in the way that tells Tommy his joke hasn't quite landed right. He gently wraps Tommy's torso in gauze, cleaning the smaller scrapes and bruises as he goes.

Tommy sighs. "I didn't mean it like *that*, Techno, it was a *joke*—"

"I don't like it when you joke about that," Techno interrupts quietly, and Tommy blinks at him in surprise. Techno stands and starts to pack the first aid kit back up. "I get that this is *normal* for you, I do. For a while, I let it seem normal to *me*. But this *isn't* normal, Tommy. You're my kid brother, and you're throwin' yourself into danger for a city that clearly doesn't love you as much as you love it. They *showed* that this mornin', and I just... I hate that you're sufferin' because nobody else *cares* like you do."

Tommy's shoulders hunch up just slightly, just a *little* defensively. "Wh-Tech, of *course* they care, I-I wouldn't-nobody would be able to help anyway, not without powers like mine," he says, and Techno gives him an unsure hum, making a face as he wipes the dagger he'd used to cut the blood-stopping webs. Tommy's brows furrow. "You're not *listening* to me. I know the risks, I'm willing to take 'em because nobody else is, and London *needs* me—"

"*We* need you," Techno says fiercely, and Tommy's protests die in his throat. "Mom, and Wil, and Tubbo, and Puffy, and... and *me*. Tommy, *I* need you. I need you alive and well, not bleedin' out on my bed because some weirdo with too much money and power decided to *shoot* you—!"

"Technically speaking, he detonated a miniature bomb on my stomach," Tommy corrects, trying to keep his tone light and jovial, because he *hates* this, he hates thinking that Techno's worried about him. Techno is better than worry; he never *has* to worry because he's always been the line of defense between threats of physical harm and his brothers. But now that Tommy's taken that on, maybe he's feeling a little inadequate. Tommy can fix that, he can reassure Techno. "But it was fine! I'll be fine in no time, Tech, thanks to your stitching up and my regeneration. It's gonna be okay! I can roll with the punches, I can take the hits, you don't have to worry."

Techno lets out a frustrated huff. "And what happens when it's *you* in that hospital bed?!" he demands, jaw quivering just slightly, and Tommy feels like the wind's been knocked out of his lungs. Techno shuts his eyes for a moment and puts a hand up to his mouth; he

refuses to make eye contact. "What am I supposed to do if you don't get back up after you get knocked down?"

Tommy winces as he moves to stand, and Techno keeps his gaze on the ground. "I always get back up again, Tech, that's... that's kinda my *thing*," Tommy tells him, laughing with no humor, and Techno sighs. Tommy swallows. "I'm... I'm sorry that Dad is still..."

Techno looks positively devastated, and Tommy shrinks back a little. "That's not your fault," he says, like he's desperate for Tommy to believe him, "you know it's not your fault, don't you?"

"I wasn't fast enough," Tommy says, and Techno's face falls, "and I couldn't... I couldn't save him in time-"

"But you *did*, Tommy, you *did* save him," Techno says, hands on Tommy's shoulders, and Tommy tries to shrug him off, to no avail. "Without you there, he wouldn't have lasted long enough for the paramedics to get to him. If it hadn't been Phil, it would've been someone else, you *gotta* know that. That TV-head guy, he's-he's a monster, it's not-you can't blame yourself because he hurt Phil, alright? *You're* not the one who demolished a building, *you're* not the one who's been terrorizin' the city. You're not in control of supervillains. You can't blame yourself for not bein' 'enough' to stop 'em, because you *are* enough. You're containin' the damage, you're doin' *good work*. You're doin' as much as you can. You're only one person, Tommy."

"I know that, I do, I-it just... it doesn't *click* in my brain the way I want it to," Tommy says, frustrated, and Techno gives his shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Like, logically, what you're saying-it makes *sense*, right? I can't go back and change the past, I'm not the one who put the building in danger in the first place, it could have been *anybody* that had been in danger. But I can't-I can't get this idea out of my head that I could've done something *more*, I could've been faster or or smarter or *something*, I... I don't know how to stop feeling guilty. Maybe I never will."

Techno nods. "I know. I wish I could change that for you," he says, and Tommy lets out a sad little laugh at that.

“You and me both.”

Techno pulls him into a hug. Tommy’s too tired to pull away.

Gotta love some good bedrock bros moments amirite?

last-minute shopping

Chapter 45: last-minute shopping

Techno takes Tommy with him to go Christmas shopping.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Techno is exhausted.

Well, that's not entirely true.

He'd gotten a full night of sleep, to be fair. He's not *physically* exhausted, but as he opens the door to Phil's hospital room to the sight of Tommy slumped over in one chair and Kristin passed out in the other, he feels a deep sort of fatigue settle in his bones. Techno huffs, setting his bag down, and he makes his way to the food court. The two of them need sleep more than he needs to go interrupting it, and if he comes back with coffee, Tommy will probably be much more agreeable.

Techno would never admit it, but he'd been looking forward to this for an entire year. Shopping for Christmas presents with Tommy is always ridiculously fun, and Techno's not about to let the whole Automata-putting-their-father-in-a-coma situation get in the way of their annual tradition. Well, it won't be their *actual* tradition without Kristin, Phil, and Wilbur, but Techno is perfectly content with that.

As much as he knows that Kristin and Wilbur need support, he knows that Tommy probably needs it more. At least for now. At least with what little support Techno can provide.

He watches the pot brew and nods at one of the nurses that passes by. By now, they must be used to at least one Watson present in the

hospital at all times-namely Tommy, considering that he's been really obsessed with making sure he knows *everything* about what's going on with Phil. Techno can't blame him, of course. It's not as if Techno isn't worried about Phil, but it's a lot easier to trust in someone getting necessary medical care when you can *see* that care being provided, see those steps being taken right in front of you.

Techno's pretty sure Tommy hasn't gone to therapy since the day Phil had gotten hurt. That's worrying in and of itself-Tommy had even started to get excited about going to therapy, if Techno's recollection is to be trusted-but what's even *more* worrying is the fact that just as Tommy had started to get better, eating full meals and getting full nights of sleep at home in a comfortable bed, he'd started to drift back to staying at Phil's bedside and remaining there.

He knows it's not necessarily his responsibility to make sure that Tommy's alright, but... he's Tommy's big brother. Of *course* he's gonna try to cheer the kid up somewhat. From what Tubbo had briefly told Techno over text, Tommy hasn't been receptive to any offers to hang out or spend time beyond keeping Tubbo on comms for patrols. Tommy's clearly in desperate need of a break. *I've already taken a long break, though*, Tommy's voice parrots in his head, *I don't need to stay on my ass any more than I already have. I've responsibilities to the city, Techno.*

If you ask Techno, he'd say that that's a load of garbage.

Screw this city. Screw them for electing the *one* guy that hates Spider-Man, screw them for getting so used to having a kid with superpowers solving their problems for them that they've forgotten to be thankful. Screw them for recording Tommy's breakdowns whenever they can and uploading them for everyone to see, for feigning support with empty hashtags while retweeting conspiracy theories about the one break he's taken since this had all begun. Techno hates London and everyone in it. Well, not *everyone*, of course, but he's pretty sure the people that are exempt from that generalization know it doesn't apply to them.

The coffee is done brewing. Techno pours three cups and grabs one of those cupholder trays, tucking the cups in, grabbing a few creams

and sugars, and heading back down the hall. As he opens the door, Tommy stirs, and Techno stifles a laugh. Of *course* the kid's enhanced senses would make him awaken at the smell of coffee. He sets the tray down on the rolling table and gently shakes Tommy's shoulder.

"Mmh, wh'time's it?" Tommy mumbles, sitting up and rubbing his eyes. Techno just rolls his eyes and moves to wake Kristin. Tommy sniffs the air. "You brought *food*."

Granted, yeah, Techno *had* brought the food Sally had cooked this morning specifically for Tommy, but he hadn't thought Tommy would be able to smell it through both the tupperware and his bag. Kristin sits up and checks her phone, sighing. "I can't stay for breakfast. Sorry. Are you spending the day here?" she asks, and Techno nods.

"Yeah, I was gonna get some Christmas shopping done," he says, shooing Tommy away from his bag. Techno's brows furrow as Kristin nods tiredly; she seems like she could use some more sleep, but it's fairly obvious that she's not going to be able to get any more. "Are you headin' off to work?"

Kristin groans. "Yeah, we've got a million projects due, and they're moving some other company into our fifty-second floor indefinitely, something about them not having a base of operations anymore," she tells them, and Techno hums, noting that Tommy looks slightly concerned. She gives Techno's arm a quick squeeze and walks over to Phil to briefly press a kiss to his forehead before she grabs her coffee and leaves.

"You're going shopping?" Tommy asks, and Techno nods, unpacking some of the food and handing it, along with some utensils, to Tommy. Techno wonders if Tommy's eating anything other than the food they all bring for him-maybe something on patrol, God only knows every food truck owner in the city feeds the kid like he's starving. Tommy stuffs his face with the bacon, egg, cheese, and ham sandwich that Sally had packed. "When are you leaving?"

"A more accurate question would be 'when are we leaving,'" Techno tells him, and Tommy blinks, still devouring that sandwich. "Y'know, I'm not gonna let you skip out on Christmas shopping. We do it

every year, and we're doing it this year, too."

Tommy smiles sadly at him and nods. "Yeah, alright," he says, quiet, far too quiet. Tommy isn't *quiet*, he's a firecracker, he's a spitfire. When he *is* more soft-spoken, it's not like this, it's not a somber kind of quiet, it's a gentle glow of embers, it's an easy warmth. This kind of quiet feels as chilling and sterile as the hospital room they're in. Like he's trying not to upset Techno.

"I thought it'd be harder to convince you to come with me," Techno adds, trying to wheedle his way to an actual answer. Tommy just shrugs and keeps eating. Well, Techno doesn't want to interrupt *that*, the kid needs to eat. But their conversation from the other day has really been bothering him. "Are you-"

"I'm fine, Tech," Tommy assures him, though he remains oddly focused on Phil's heart rate monitor. Techno passes him one of the two remaining coffee cups and starts to down the other.

He has no idea what to do here. On one hand, he feels like he should leave it alone; the more he pushes Tommy to talk about how he feels, the more likely it is that Tommy will only withdraw further. Techno's not as stoic as he likes to make people think he is—partially because it's funny, partially because dealing with other people's emotions is uncomfortable, and he'd prefer to do that strictly with the people he trusts and cares about. He knows that he should get Tommy to confide in someone, even if it's not him.

Tubbo hasn't gotten him to talk, nor has Ranboo, nor has *Wilbur*, and while Techno is fairly confident that Tommy feels somewhat comfortable confiding in him now, if those three haven't had any luck, Techno's *definitely* not going to. There's still too much distance there, too much residual tension left. They'd talked about it, sure, but just talking about it doesn't erase the fact that, for whatever reason, Techno had shut Tommy out for *years*.

He still doesn't fully understand why he'd done it, but it's done, and all he can do now is work to make up for it.

"Tommy, if you're not... if you don't want to talk, that's okay. But I'm here for you. It's gonna be rough," Techno says, and Tommy hums,

sipping on his coffee and still looking at Phil, still tidying the sheets, “especially with Dad bein’ *here* for Christmas-”

“He’ll be up before then,” Tommy says, “surely.”

Techno resists the urge to sigh. “Yeah. He might wake up before then,” Techno grants, and Tommy nods, seemingly satisfied. Techno sits down in the chair next to him. “But... kid, you gotta be prepared for the possibility that he *won’t* be.”

“Don’t be silly, Tech, of course he’s gonna be awake,” Tommy says, and his hands start to shake a little. It’s minute, but it’s noticeable. Ah, damn, what was that thing that Kristin had told them all about? Those breathing exercises that Tommy’s therapist had recommended. Techno can’t remember the exact counts. “He’s gonna be awake, and we’re gonna have Christmas at home, like we always do.”

“I just don’t want you to get your hopes up,” Techno tells him gently, “the doctors still aren’t sure when he’ll be awake.”

“I know,” Tommy says, sounding like he’s been choked. Techno takes his hand. He’s not the best with physical affection, much preferring words and little gestures that show that he *does* care, that he means it when he says he does. But Tommy is a very tactile person, always has been, and what Techno prefers doesn’t really matter right now. Tommy laughs quietly. “It’s... it’s stupid, innit? To hope he’ll be up.”

“It’s not stupid,” Techno says, and he means it, “it’s optimistic. You’re hopeful. That’s a *good* thing, especially considering everything you’re going through. It’s, uh... it’s something I really admire about you, actually.”

Tommy huffs out a laugh. “Really? You don’t think I’m delusional or in denial or some shit?” he asks, and Techno knocks his knuckles against Tommy’s shoulder.

“Well, a little of that, too, but...” he trails off, and Tommy laughs again. There’s that warmth, that easy glow Techno’s come to associate with his little brother. “Dad’s gonna be fine while we’re

gone, y'know. He's got his doctors and his nurses. I can even call Wil to come stay with him if you want."

Tommy shakes his head. "No, no, I know. It's fine, I just-I need a minute, that's all," he says, and Techno nods, giving Tommy's hand a light squeeze. He wishes he knew what goes on in Tommy's mind, wishes he could just peek into his brother's psyche and understand what he's thinking. He wants to know *why*, wants to know how Tommy had decided on becoming Spider-Man. There's got to be *something* to it, something that Techno had missed, something that he hadn't known about Tommy because he'd missed out on watching Tommy growing up.

If that were the case, though, he supposes Wilbur would've figured it out ages ago.

Techno honestly has no idea why Tommy is still acting as Spider-Man. Obviously, to some degree, he recognizes that Tommy feels a sort of responsibility for the city, for the actions of the supervillains terrorizing it, but... Techno just can't wrap his mind around *why*. Especially not now that he knows who half of them are. Frankly, Techno's never particularly liked or disliked Quackity, so the news didn't exactly shatter his worldview, but for Tommy...

Tommy had looked up to Quackity. Techno knows that. Tommy had seen Quackity as someone to be admired, someone to appreciate and listen to and take advice from. In a way, Techno supposes that Tommy had started to see Quackity the same way Quackity sees Tommy-as a brother. It stings a little to know that, if Techno's being honest with himself. But it hurts even more to see *Tommy* hurting, makes Techno infuriated to know that the man Tommy had put his faith and trust into had taken that and thrown it away, and for what? For money? Power?

Nothing is worth betraying Tommy. Nothing.

Not that Quackity *knows* that Tommy is Spider-Man, of course, but Techno can't understand it either way. Having the responsibility of students looking up to you, counting on you-had that not been enough of a deterrent for Quackity? Is that not enough to keep him from committing crime after crime? What on *earth* could be worth

potentially hurting everyone you care about?

Techno doesn't understand it.

He's constantly trying to hold it together, too. If Tommy sees him break down, even just a *little*, Techno has no doubts that Tommy would blame himself, would think that *he's* the reason Techno is stressed beyond belief. Techno can't do that to Tommy. He can talk through things with Wilbur and Kristin, cry quietly with them and cope with them, but he can't do it in front of Tommy. They've all reached a silent agreement about that.

Kristin and Wilbur don't know *why* Tommy's beating himself up about it, but they don't have to know. Techno gets why Tommy wants to keep his identity a secret from the people he cares about; after all, look at what had happened to Phil, and nobody even knew that Phil's related to Spider-Man. After all the other horrible things that have happened to Tommy, Techno wouldn't put it past the villains to find the people he cares about and use them against him.

It makes sense, but it doesn't make things any less painful. It doesn't make it any easier to have to cover for Tommy, to have to watch him get hurt over and over without being able to talk to anyone other than Tubbo or Tommy himself about it. Techno's just relieved he doesn't also have to think about his classes on top of everything else until January.

Tommy shifts, and Techno pulls himself out of his thoughts, humming. "You ready to go?" he asks, and Tommy nods as he rolls his shoulders. Techno stands and reaches over to give Phil's arm a gentle pat. "See you later, Dad."

Tommy looks up at that, eyes curious. Techno's glad for that; it's better than when his eyes are empty and tired. "You talk to him too?" he asks, sounding hopeful, and Techno nods. He's rambled idly to Phil every so often. It's better than the suffocating silence of the room. Tommy beams, and Techno pushes another one of Sally's home-cooked snacks into his hands as he leads the way out of the room. "I knew I couldn't be the only one! Because, like, what if he can hear us? I don't want him to feel lonely."

Smiling, Techno claps a hand on Tommy's back and nods. "You get me," he says, and Tommy positively glows, scarfing down the food as they make their way to the car park. The glow dims, though, when they get to Techno's car. Ah, right. Techno rubs little circles into Tommy's back-he's seen Kristin do it a few times, maybe this'll help him somewhat-and his brows furrow. "It's alright, kid, it's just a car. It's clean, I promise. Like nothing even happened."

Tommy blinks in surprise. "I-I didn't even-how'd you know I was...?" he trails off, and Techno just gives him what he hopes is a supportive smile. It's hard enough for *Techno* to get back in his car after what had happened. He can't imagine it's any easier for Tommy. Tommy takes a deep breath and jumps up and down just slightly, like he's psyching himself up. He starts to mumble little affirmations to himself. "Right, right, I've got this, this is easy. It's just Tech's car, it's just a car, it's not a fuckin' *supervillain*..."

Techno chuckles quietly and moves to get into the driver's seat, patiently waiting for Tommy to approach the passenger door. Eventually, Tommy *does* talk himself up enough to get in, and Techno gives him an encouraging smile. "The shops aren't too far," he assures him, and Tommy nods, oddly stiff as he buckles himself in. Techno pulls out of the car park, and Tommy takes a few more deep breaths, eyes closed. What was that thing that Tommy's therapist had told them to say when he's close to a panic attack? "You're safe here, it's gonna be okay. Take as much time as you need, I'm right here."

Swallowing, Tommy nods. "Yeah, I know," he whispers, hands gripping the knees of his jeans so hard that Techno can see his knuckles going white. Tommy opens his eyes for a moment and closes them again, shaking his head. Techno pulls over. "I-I don't think I can do this, I can't, Tech, i-it's-it's like I'm *there*, it's like I'm back-!"

He dissolves into a sob, and Techno starts to reach over, only to stop himself. He's not sure if this is one of those times that touch will make it worse. "Is it... Tommy, what changed? I was able to drive you back and forth from the hospital just a few days ago," he says, confused, and Tommy whimpers, hands clamped over his ears. "W-We're not back there, kid, Phil's okay, there's no blood."

"It's-I was running on autopilot, I-I didn't have the space to *think* about it, now I'm *thinking* about it," Tommy gasps, hands moving to scrub at his eyes. Techno gently takes his wrists and moves them down. The skin around his wrists looks irritated; Tommy had explained once that when he's stressed or feels like he's in danger, his body starts producing more web fluid. "I can't, Techno, I-I can't do it, I'm sorry, I-I! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to get him hurt!"

"It's okay! There's nothing to apologize for," Techno tells him, and Tommy takes a shuddering breath, eyes wild. Right, that thing with reminding Tommy of where he is, that's probably the best idea right now. "You're not in your suit. You're clean, your clothes are clean, they're comfortable. You're in the car with me, we're going Christmas shopping. There's no blood. The car is clean. Phil is okay. You're healing from your fight with Blaze and Quackity, not the fight with Automata. You're not in danger, I'm not in danger, Phil's not in danger. No one's in danger, everyone is safe. *You're* safe, Tommy."

Tommy eyes unfocus, then focus again, hands shaking as he nods. "Right, I'm safe, I'm in the car with you, there's no blood," he mumbles, and Techno nods. "I don't have to fight anyone, I'm okay."

"You're safe," Techno repeats, and Tommy nods.

"You can start driving again, I think," he says in a very small voice, and Techno's brows furrow. As much as he would like to, he doesn't want Tommy to have another panic attack. Tommy shakes his head. "I'm gonna be fine, maybe just... just keep reminding me of where we are...? If that's okay?"

"Yeah, kid, no problem," Techno tells him, and he carefully pulls back onto the road, glancing over at Tommy every so often to make sure he really *is* okay with this, and he's not just trying to pull it together for Techno's sake. "We're on the road, we're going to the shops. We need to buy presents for everybody, because we're having Christmas this year or so help me God. I'm right here, I'm with you, the car is clean. The car is clean, and we're almost at the shops. The car is *clean*, and you're safe. There's no villains out. You don't have to fight anyone. There's not even an *iota* of red anywhere, unless you count the band of your bracelet thingy. The car is clean."

"Thank you, thanks," Tommy murmurs as they pull into a spot close to the pavement, and Techno passes him a bottle of water. Tommy chugs half of it. "I'm... I'm good. Let's go in."

Techno gives him a wary look, because he's not entirely confident that pale and shaky counts as being 'good,' but he doesn't want to push it. They head into the store, and Tommy grabs the cart, eyes determined. Techno doesn't argue. "Right, so I'm thinkin' since we have to shop for Sally now, we could probably get away with buying her a candle or something," he says, and Tommy looks offended on Sally's behalf.

"Uh, excuse *you*, we're not getting candles for *anyone*, candles are a *quitter's* gift, Techno," he says, voice still shaky, but jovial, and Techno feels some of the tension leave his shoulders. This is good—Tommy is actually somewhat okay. Tommy leads them down an aisle filled with novelty gifts, picks up a rather atrocious-looking elf hat, and grins. "We should get this for Wil."

Techno snorts and puts it in the cart. "Seriously, we gotta find some decent presents. We could get Mom some of that really nice wine she likes," he suggests, and Tommy nods enthusiastically, picking out a couple of the fancy chocolate boxes and adding them to the cart. "Who are those for?"

"For the nurses," Tommy says quietly, and Techno doesn't question him further. They head down the aisles, Tommy suggesting more and more outlandish things as they go, and Techno rolls his eyes. At least he's already gotten his present for Tommy. Well, technically it's *two* presents. One to give Tommy that he can use as Spider-Man, and the other to give him in front of their family. "Tech! Tech, look at this!"

It's a guitar care kit, complete with polishes and oils and all sorts of things that Wilbur would probably go nuts over. "That's... actually really perfect," Techno says, "add it."

Tommy does, and they turn to go into the next aisle, only to almost crash their cart into the person in front of them. "Oh, hey, boys!" Puffy says, and Foolish gives them a wave from beside her. "You doin' your Christmas shopping too?"

Techno nods, and Tommy immediately goes to snoop in Puffy's cart, only to be stopped by Foolish, who promptly picks him up like a cat and places him next to Techno. "Don't spoil it for yourself," Foolish tells him, grinning, and Tommy flips him off, eyes narrowed. Foolish nods at Techno. "Hey, Tech."

"Hey," Techno says, and Puffy glances down at her phone, frowning. Techno's brows furrow. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, there's just a big commotion going on a little ways away," she explains, and Tommy perks up. Techno looks over at him. He knows, deep down, that there's no stopping Tommy from jumping right into whatever supervillain antics are happening, but that doesn't mean he can't hope that the unspoken social contract of not abandoning a conversation while it's still happening will keep Tommy in place for now. Puffy hums. "How are you guys? You holdin' up okay?"

"We're doing alright. Is Tubbo back at home?" Tommy asks, and Techno subtly grabs his arm, trying to convey that if Tommy leaves his side, Techno's going to have an aneurysm.

"He's staying back because *someone* forgot to get him a birthday present," Puffy chides lightly, and Foolish goes a bit red at that. Techno had honestly forgotten that Tubbo's birthday is just a few days away. Puffy smiles an easy kind of smile. "How's your mom doing? Is Wil okay?"

"They're feeling a lot better. Mum's kinda stressed about work, but she's alright," Tommy says quickly. "It was great seeing you! We've really gotta get back to it, gotta get all those presents and get back to the hospital, y'know?"

Damn him. "Oh, of course! If you boys need anything, don't hesitate to let us know," Puffy says, and Foolish ruffles Tommy's hair.

Tommy nods and waves, abandoning the cart and immediately hurrying off, and Techno struggles to catch up to him. "Tommy, you're not *seriously* gonna go see what that is, right?" he grumbles, because while it might be a little selfish to admit, Techno really doesn't want to watch Tommy get hurt yet again.

"I *have* to," Tommy tells him fiercely, and Techno sighs. "Just-get the rest of the shit, check out without me, I'll go check it out. I won't let anyone get hurt, I promise."

"It's not everyone *else* I'm worried about," Techno says, but Tommy takes that as permission, scurrying off and leaving Techno stranded in the shop. Well, he supposes it can't hurt to finish up here and meet Tommy at the scene of whatever fight is going on so that he doesn't have to swing back if he *does* get hurt.

Techno grabs the first things that stand out to him as appropriate gifts and beats out a family of six and an elderly lady to be first in line for a newly opening checkout. He can barely remember to exchange pleasantries with the clerk, mind too preoccupied with worries of Tommy getting thrown around or shot or, hell, blown up again.

He loads the presents into his trunk and opens up his phone, grimacing when he sees that Blaze, 404, *and* Automata are all causing problems a few blocks away. Hell, Techno could probably *walk* there.

So he does.

He locks his car and books it to the scene of the fight, only to be stopped by a police officer that steps in front of him, arm outstretched. "No civilians beyond this point," he says, and Techno has half a mind to ask him if he *really* thinks he can stop him.

But he doesn't want to cause a scene, not when Tommy's already got enough to worry about.

So Techno steps back into the steadily-growing crowd, hands clenched into anxious fists as he watches a red and white blur dash around debris and bombs and clouds of spores. The people next to him-pressed up against the barrier like this is some *spectacle*, like this isn't his brother's life on the line-are filming. Go figure.

Techno tries his hardest to keep to the front of the crowd, watching with horrified yet apt attention as Automata throws a car at Tommy. Thankfully, Tommy catches it and throws it into the grouped-up

drones that have been firing at him, and he flips backwards onto the awning of a shop. 404 fires another blast of spores, and Tommy deftly dodges. Techno can only hope that he'd remembered to fasten his gas mask properly.

Craning his neck, Techno watches as Tommy is blasted back through the wall of a building, and he winces. That's gonna need some ice packs for sure; he'll have to remember to buy some more the next time he's out. To Techno's dismay, Tommy jumps right back into the fight, barely giving the villains any time to recuperate as he dodges and punches and kicks his way to them.

He's actually getting the upper hand! The little drone that Tubbo's always updating, it unfolds from Tommy's chest and starts firing rubber bullets and web bombs at the villains, always dancing out of reach. 404 falls first, Tommy kicking him into the side of a stationary bus, and Automata yells something out in frustration.

More of Blaze's drones start to appear, and Techno pushes past the crowd as far as he can, until he's right up against the police barricade. It's surreal to watch Tommy fighting these wackjobs in real time. Tommy's a hell of a fighter, slinging webs and doing acrobatics to kick their asses, and Techno doesn't know whether to feel pride or worry as Tommy slams Blaze into the side of a building. Blaze slumps to the ground, unconscious, and Techno allows himself a pre-emptive cheer. Just one to go. Tommy can *do* this.

The crowd around him cheers too, the cops looking rather unamused, and Techno tries to make out what's going on as Tommy and Automata circle each other. The little drone folds back into Tommy's hoodie. Automata is clearly rambling on, given his hand gestures, and Tommy keeps looking around, shoulders tensed. Techno watches as they continue to circle each other, and Tommy suddenly freezes, looking directly up.

Techno follows his line of sight, and his heart drops to his stomach.

He's too shocked to even scream when Automata drops an enormous chunk of a nearby skyscraper directly onto Tommy.

The crowd immediately dissolves into screams, and Techno's body

moves without his permission. He tries desperately to climb over the barricade, only to be pulled back by a couple of officers. Evidently, other people are trying to get over the barricade as well, but they're all being pushed back.

Nobody can get to Tommy.

I really said FUCK IT and posted a chapter two days in a row, maybe I'll fuck around and post the next chapter tonight, we'll see. I wrote like 12k words last night in a frenzy, so who knows?

under pressure

Chapter 46: under pressure

Tommy regains consciousness.

Did my Christmas shopping, had a nap, and now I'm uploading a second chapter today. As a treat.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Tommy opens his eyes.

It's painful.

Everything hurts.

His entire body feels like it's been pummeled to a pulp.

He can barely move, lungs struggling to inflate as he takes shaky, short breaths. Tommy cries out in pain as he tries to lift his head; his brain feels like it's too big for his fucking skull. Tommy coughs, and something warm spatters across his lips. That can't be good. He tries to flex his fingers, only to find that it's *really* hard to move his hands. His body is durable, but it's definitely not *that* durable.

Automata having dropped a building on him is, without a doubt, enough to have broken him.

Tommy looks out into the haze of dust and sees Automata picking up 404 and Blaze's limp forms with bent metal sheets. Shaking,

almost uncontrollably, Tommy fires off a web in his direction. He can't even hope to aim right now. Automata's silhouette stiffens, and the crushing weight atop Tommy gets even heavier.

A choked scream escaping his throat, Tommy tries to move his arms, to no avail. Everything *hurts*. Tommy struggles to grasp at the asphalt. He can't feel his legs. *He can't fucking feel his legs*. Tommy chokes on a sob. He can't even move his shoulders. He presses his forehead to the ground and tries to catch his breath.

This is his own fault.

He'd been taunting and teasing, playing games and showing off. He'd taken out 404, fucking *finally*, and Automata had been outraged. He'd taken out Blaze next-he'd actually thought he might be able to take the three of them down at last-and Automata had visibly started to panic, which Tommy had taken as his opening.

And then Automata had mentioned he'd gotten an upgrade.

"Just for emergencies," he'd said.

Tommy hears static under the ringing in his ears, and he whimpers, coughing more as he tries desperately to get his legs to move. His foot's moving, that's good, that means at least one of his bones isn't broken, but it still fucking *aches*, like nothing Tommy's ever felt before. His heart pounds, and Tommy can feel it everywhere, a terrified sort of instinctual thing.

He grunts, trying to free up at least one arm from the debris, and his comms crackle. *"my?! Tommy?! Tommy, talk to me!"* Tubbo shouts, panicked, and Tommy's bottom lip starts to tremble. His body feels as though it's being ripped apart atom by atom. *"Tommy, say something, please, j-just tell me you're alive!"*

Tommy's throat feels raw. He must've been screaming at some point. "I'm alive," he croaks, and Tubbo's relieved cry makes his ears ring even more. Tommy manages to get his elbow out from under the debris, and he chokes on another sob. "I-It hurts...!"

"I'm calling ambulances, they say they're not being allowed through

the police barriers, I-I don't know-what do you want me to tell them?" Tubbo asks, frantic, and Tommy's skull aches as he tries to move his other arm. *"What's broken? What hurts?"*

"Everything," Tommy says, voice breaking, and Tubbo makes a sound like a wounded animal. It isn't as though Tommy hadn't seen the building coming down. He'd stood there, paralyzed with fear, as Automata had dropped it on him.

"Okay, I-I'm telling them th-" Tubbo is cut off as Tommy shifts his shoulder, and debris comes crumbling down from above him, some of it hitting his head. The crackling goes quiet; his comms are broken.

There's no more Tubbo to guide him out of this. No ever-present best friend to comfort him.

Tommy is alone.

No one is even being allowed within a hundred meters of him.

He's hurt and alone, and no one's going to get him out of here.

Tommy feels his chest tighten, the lump in his throat starting to hurt just as much as the rest of him as he swallows around it. "Please, s-somebody... ! Anybody... ! Help me!" he cries, ignoring the way it makes his throat feel even more scratchy. No one can hear him. They're too far away. He's going to die here. *"Please, I need h-help! I-I can't breathe!"*

Nobody comes to his aid.

Tommy sobs. Techno had been right; he never should've left the fucking store. Now he's here, trapped underneath a metric ton of concrete and steel, and he's going to be crushed to death. No heroic saves, no goodbyes, no one to hold his hand while he feels the energy seep from his bones, the fight give from his muscles.

"Come on, Spider-Man!" someone shouts.

"You fuckers! He needs help! Fucking *help* him!" another screams.

Tommy looks up at the mass of silhouettes that forms the crowd. The police are having difficulty holding them back. He tries again to shift some of the weight off of himself, only for his hand to slip in a puddle of his own blood. It's fucking nauseating. His regeneration is struggling to keep up with what had happened; he can feel his muscle fibers weaving back together, bones desperately trying to fix hairline fractures, blood flowing to his organs and multiplying rapidly.

He wonders why his body is still trying to keep him alive when his mind has already given up.

The dust has settled. Tommy can see the people in the crowd now. Mothers with children-Kristin is at work, she's expecting him to be there when she gets back to Phil's hospital room-teenagers with their phones dangling limply in their hands as they cry out-Tubbo doesn't know whether or not Tommy is alive-and a familiar head of pink hair struggling against the cops and yelling something in outrage.

Techno.

Techno had come to watch him fight.

Techno had come to watch him die.

Tommy can't let that happen. He can't let Techno see him die, can't let Techno watch as the life leaves his eyes, can't let Techno be in that same place Tommy had been in-a loved one limp in his arms, bleeding steadily, sluggishly, agonizingly. Tommy can't do that to him. He can't make Techno feel helpless, feel like he could've done more.

Shifting his arms again, Tommy manages to get them both free, and he takes a minute to catch his breath, wincing as his ribs push against his lungs. It's fine, he's gonna be fine. He *has* to be fine, he has to be okay so that Techno and Tubbo won't worry. So that Wilbur and Kristin and Puffy and Ranboo aren't left wondering. His palms scratch against the ground as he tries to crawl out from under the debris; that isn't going to work, not with the way his arms keep quivering.

He just needs a minute to think. He can feel his legs again, which is good, because he kind of needs them if he's going to get out of here. Tommy groans as the concrete above him shifts, and he cries out when a brick comes down on his hand. Flexing it-at least it's not broken even more-he tries to bring his legs closer to his body.

"You're Spider-Man," he whispers to himself, "y-you can *do* this."

The pain is white-hot and blinding as Tommy slowly pushes enough out of the way that his legs can move freely if he really tries, and he chokes on a scream as he lifts an arm to grasp at the concrete above him, keeping one hand on the ground. God, he's incredibly broken in so many places. Taking a few deep breaths, Tommy makes a strangled noise as he lifts his other hand to brace against the concrete.

Shaking, every muscle in his body screaming in protest, Tommy pushes upwards. He tries his hardest to drag his feet underneath him, and he nearly stumbles. Debris and rubble fall to the asphalt, and Tommy cries out again as he shoves the concrete further upwards. The groaning and screeching of steel against stone grates against his ears.

His foot skids a bit, but he's able to crouch. Tommy adjusts his grip on the concrete and breathes heavily, chest heaving and lungs straining against his ribs. His legs are shaking as he tries to push the concrete up more. If he doesn't stand, it's likely he'll get trapped again. The crowd has gone silent save for the occasional gasp, and Tommy's probably making all sorts of strangled cries and groans as he slowly but surely moves the mass of concrete further up, but he can't hear any of it; the ringing in his ears has returned.

The entirety of his body is shaking, every fiber of his being screaming in protest as he strains against the weight of the concrete. Everything fucking *hurts*, but he's almost out, he can almost make it out. Screaming out in agony-his pulse rushes in his ears, and he swallows bile as it rises to his throat-Tommy stands up fully, struggling to keep the concrete up. If he uses one last push of strength to throw it upwards, as much as he possibly can, he can dive out of the way.

So that's what he does.

The second the concrete leaves his grasp, Tommy flings himself out from under it and rolls into the street, coughing and sputtering. The crowd goes fucking *insane*, and Tommy sobs, exhaustion seeping through every pore in his body, and he struggles to stand, legs shaking and hands limp by his sides.

He staggers forward.

One step.

Ba-dum.

His heart pounds.

Two steps.

Ba-dum.

His jaw goes slack.

Three steps.

Ba-dum.

His eyes roll back into his head.

He collapses on the ground. Everything fades to black.

Ranboo is struggling against the tide of the crowd.

Admittedly, he hadn't meant to stumble upon a Spider-Man fight, but he'd stuck around, just to watch what had happened. He almost wishes he hadn't. The past couple of minutes had been agonizing to listen to; the crowd-and Ranboo-had watched, horrified, as Spider-Man had pleaded for *someone* to help him, only for the cops to hold back those in the crowd actually willing and trying to help.

Now, Spider-Man has crumpled into a heap on the ground, and Ranboo shoulders past as many people as he can to get to the front.

The cops still won't let anyone go by, but they're so busy keeping the central crowd contained that there's an opening to the side. No one's noticed it yet, and Ranboo moves along the barrier to squeeze through the gap.

A cop notices him.

They grab his shirt, and Ranboo stumbles away from their grip, the sleeve of his shirt ripping with the strain of having to pull away so abruptly. Ranboo takes off running, and the cop is forced to turn back to the crowd to contain it now that the gap has been exposed. Ranboo has no idea why he's doing this, in all honesty; it's not like there's anything *he* can do for Spider-Man, not as some civilian. But there's something in him, this pull in his gut that tells him this is the *right* thing to do, the *moral* thing to do.

The *brave* thing to do.

Ranboo clammers over the rubble, stumbling over broken chunks of concrete and scrap metal, and he comes to a stop in front of Spider-Man's limp form on the ground. Ranboo drops down and turns him so that he's on his back. Oh *crap*, that doesn't look good. He's bleeding pretty bad, and he's *definitely* got some broken ribs.

His suit's all torn up, too, and Ranboo shrugs off his jacket, pressing it over what looks like the worst of the wounds. Ranboo knows terrifyingly little about the field of first aid, and he kind of has no idea what he's doing. But him being here is better than no one being here, and hopefully this will help Spider-Man rather than hurt him.

There's one cut on Spider-Man's hand that looks particularly nasty, and Ranboo rips off the already torn portion of his sleeve to wrap it around Spider-Man's palm in a makeshift bandage, feeling a little panicked as the blood starts to seep sluggishly through the fabric. "Okay, okay, just *think*," he mutters to himself, moving the jacket aside to take another look at the wounds on Spider-Man's torso. "You're gonna be fine, it's gonna be fine, I'm gonna-well, I-I dunno *what* I'm gonna do, but I sure am gonna do *something*."

Ranboo presses his hands down on Spider-Man's side, where the biggest gash is, and Spider-Man flinches slightly, groaning

unconsciously. Oh, this is *really* bad. Ranboo presses down harder- because that's what you're supposed to do, isn't it? Everyone on TV always says to apply pressure to wounds to stop the bleeding.

But this isn't TV, this is an actual living, breathing person bleeding out in front of him. Well, Ranboo's pretty sure that *something* is going on with Spider-Man's wounds, given that the blood under his hands is bubbling every couple of seconds. It's a little stomach-churning, but Ranboo determinedly keeps his hands clamped over the gash.

Spider-Man stirs slightly, and the eyes on his mask blink open. Or, well, as much as one can count a slight sliver of white as the eyes being 'open.' Ranboo lets out a panicked yelp as the blood bubbles again, and Spider-Man stirs once more, coughing a little.

Judging by the dark spot near where Ranboo assumes his mouth is, it's safe to say that he's not exactly in great shape. Ranboo wracks his brain for any medical knowledge-if it's from that show about doctors that Tubbo had made him watch that one time, he'll take what he can get. He's pretty sure that Spider-Man's biology isn't fully human, but surely the same rules apply, right?

Ranboo moves one of his now-bloodied hands away from the gash in Spider-Man's side, trying *very* hard not to make a face when the blood drips off of his fingers. He momentarily debates on whether or not he should go for the jaw or the hand, but he decides against the hand; he can't even find his *own* pulse there, and he doesn't want to panic unnecessarily.

Well, not any more than he already is.

Ranboo slips two fingers underneath Spider-Man's mask and presses them against his jawline, right where the pulse point should be.

Ba-dum.

Oh, thank *God*.

Okay, so Spider-Man is definitely still alive. That's good to know.

Ranboo nods to himself and puts his hand back on the wound, wincing when Spider-Man's body jerks in response to the pain. He wonders why the hell the ambulances aren't here yet. Maybe they can't get through the crowd or something, but that doesn't make much sense. The cops should've been able to evacuate the crowd in order to let an ambulance through.

In any case, Ranboo needs to keep applying pressure, and he's not entirely sure that his hands are the best way to do that. They're the best he's got right now, though, so he just keeps pressing down. A finger slips into the cut, and Ranboo gags as he pulls it back out. Evidently, that had been enough to make Spider-Man somewhat conscious, because he starts hacking up a lung.

"Fuck," he groans, and Ranboo couldn't agree more. Spider-Man's head lolls, and Ranboo lets out a nervous, high-pitched laugh as he tries to keep his hands from slipping again. Spider-Man manages to turn his head enough to look at Ranboo, who waves, immediately regretting it as blood drips down his hand and over his arm. The eyes on Spider-Man's mask go wide. "Oh, *shit*, i-it's you!"

Ranboo blinks as he returns to his efforts in putting pressure on the wound. "You remember me?" he asks, a little incredulous, and Spider-Man hums, chest moving unevenly. Ranboo shakes his head. "Doesn't matter. You're gonna be fine, okay? I've got you, I'm right here, y-you're losing a lot of blood, but that's okay, I'm sure an ambulance is on the way."

Spider-Man huffs out a weak laugh. "Shit, man, I-I dunno," he says, reaching a trembling hand up to his ribs and wincing. "Ah, fuck, that smarts-!"

He cuts himself off with a strangled noise as Ranboo presses down harder. "It's fine, see? There's gonna be sirens any second now, don't worry," he says, and Spider-Man makes an unsure kind of sound. Ranboo whispers frantic apologies, swapping out his hands for his jacket; his hands keep slipping, which isn't really ideal when he's trying to keep them in one place.

"Y-You have to promise me something," Spider-Man says, feebly gripping Ranboo's arm, and Ranboo nods.

"Yeah, man, anything," Ranboo tells him, and Spider-Man coughs again.

"You can't let-shit, ah, *fuck*, th-that hurts-! Y-You can't let anyone take my mask off," he says urgently, and Ranboo nods, praying that there'll be sirens soon.

He wonders why nobody else has been able to get through the barrier, not even civilians slipping through the cracks, but he can't focus on that. Not now. Ranboo doesn't have the energy to spare, not when there's a superhero practically bleeding out in his arms.

Spider-Man starts to shiver, and Ranboo tries his best to lay out the portion of his jacket not currently occupied with the wound over him. "I'm sorry, I know you're cold, I know, it's gonna be okay," Ranboo says, voice quivering, and Spider-Man blinks slowly. Finally, *finally*, in the distance, Ranboo can see red and blue lights. He turns back to Spider-Man, smiling excitedly, albeit a little shakily. "They're coming, man, they're gonna come help you!"

The sirens are turned on, but the crowd doesn't part, and the barrier doesn't budge. Ranboo's bottom lip starts to tremble, and he turns back to Spider-Man, slipping his fingers back under the mask to feel for a pulse.

Ba-dum.

It's still there. Good.

Spider-Man paws at his hand clumsily, and Ranboo withdraws it. The sirens are still loud, the lights are still flashing, but no one is letting the ambulance in. "C-Can you... can you hold my hand?" Spider-Man asks, almost inaudible, terrified and innocent, like a child that's just had a nightmare.

Ranboo swallows, and he takes Spider-Man's hand, lightly squeezing it. "You're gonna be okay, they're right here, they're almost here," he says, and Spider-Man shivers. Ranboo turns his head towards the ambulance, eyes burning, and he raises his voice. "He needs help! Let the ambulance through, *please!*"

The ambulance doesn't move.

Spider-Man doesn't fight him as Ranboo puts his fingers back over his pulse point, gripping to Spider-Man's hand like a lifeline, like it's *him* that's bleeding out.

Ba-dum.

It's slow, but it's there, and it's steady.

Ranboo's breathing starts to get panicked, and he keeps looking back and forth between the ambulance and Spider-Man. There's no way they'll just let him *die* here, right? They can't, they *won't*, there's no way-

"Open a fucking path for the ambulance!" Tubbo's voice echoes from every speaker in what feels like a mile radius, and Ranboo winces at the volume of it. *"Let it in! **Now!**"*

Spider-Man's shoulders start to slump, and Ranboo grips his hand tighter. Spider-Man gives him a weak squeeze in return. Finally, *finally*, the ambulance starts to slowly make its way to them, and Ranboo waves frantically, chest heaving with panicked breaths as the paramedics rush towards them.

"H-He's bleeding really badly," Ranboo tells them, and one of them starts to lift up Spider-Man's mask. Ranboo darts forward and smacks their hand, smiling apologetically. "Uh. Sorry. But that's, uh... that's kinda not something I can let you do."

"Do you *know* him?" the other paramedic asks as they get Spider-Man on a gurney, now respectfully avoiding his mask. Ranboo feels a little pride swell in his chest at that.

"Uh, no, I just-he just made me promise not to let anyone take his mask off, a-and I don't wanna break a promise to a guy that just lifted, like, twelve tons of straight-up concrete," he says, omitting the fact that he would've done it regardless.

Spider-Man's secret identity is *clearly* important to him, and as curious as Ranboo might be, he respects that. There could be any number of reasons why the masked vigilante is just that-masked-

and it's not Ranboo's place to question what any of those might be. So he'll do his part.

There's no way a kid *this* terrified and *this* brave is anything but a goddamn hero.

Ranboo doesn't know how he ever doubted that.

"Are you conscious?" one of the paramedics asks, and Spider-Man groans, but he nods, and Ranboo gives his hand another light squeeze. The paramedic turns Spider-Man's head gently, and he cries out in pain. "Okay, you definitely have a head injury. Can you tell us your blood type?"

"It's red, innit?" Spider-Man says, slightly delirious, and Ranboo barks out a surprised laugh at that. "I-I dunno the letter, I'm-it *hurts*."

"Okay, that's okay, we're gonna load you onto the ambulance," the paramedic says, and Ranboo is forced to let go of Spider-Man as they stand the gurney up and start wheeling him towards the ambulance. Ranboo follows, leaving his bloodstained jacket discarded on the ground. He's got his phone and his wallet in his jeans, he doesn't need the jacket anyway. As soon as he catches up to them, the paramedic shakes their head. "You can't come with."

"I'm coming and I'm making sure nobody takes that kid's mask off," Ranboo tells them firmly, and the paramedic sighs, stepping aside. Ranboo clambers into the ambulance and sits beside Spider-Man, watching with bated breath as they hook him up to a heart monitor.

His heart rate is almost non-existent, but he's still semi-conscious. It's one of those things that Ranboo's *pretty* sure is a medical marvel. Spider-Man weakly answers the other paramedic's questions, stuttering and coughing his way through the words. Ranboo keeps an eye on the paramedic's hand, just in case.

He knows, logically, that they probably need to take a look at Spider-Man's eyes to check for a concussion or something similar, but he's not about to take that chance. The paramedic starts to work on Spider-Man's wounds, only to be interrupted by the radio crackling and going through static channel after static channel.

"I can give you any medical information of his you need to know,"
Tubbo's voice says from the radio, and Ranboo would be impressed with just how many public radio waves Tubbo's hacked into today if he weren't so worried about Spider-Man.

Idly, Ranboo realizes this means that Tubbo knows Spider-Man's identity.

If he's got access to the guy's medical records, Tubbo knows who Spider-Man is.

Spider-Man whimpers on the gurney as they go over a particularly bad bump in the road, and Ranboo discards his momentary spiral to take Spider-Man's hand again. His steady mechanical heartbeat sounds off every couple of seconds, and Ranboo finds himself growing more and more anxious as it slows.

But it's still *there*, and that's what matters. It's still steady, his heart's still *beating*.

Ranboo clings to Spider-Man's hand and hopes.

Ba-dum.

It's all he can do now.

As my hero, Sonic, would say: That's no good!

a creature of unknown origin

Chapter 47: a creature of unknown origin

A brief look into the inner workings of Headquarters.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Charlie doesn't think he's a *bad* person, per se.

Of course, he's done some questionable things, but who hasn't? Not *everyone* moonlights as a monstrous supervillain, sure, but everyone's done *something* that they're not exactly proud of having done. In particular, Charlie's not proud of moonlighting as said monstrous supervillain.

It's not as though he hasn't tried to pull back at all; Quackity has given him *far* less assignments since he'd been seen in public. That had been one rule that Charlie had broken completely and definitely unintentionally. It hadn't even been his fault! He'd been minding his business when all of a sudden, Slime had *insisted* that someone who 'smelled like Spider-Man' had left a tea shop, and Charlie had regained consciousness in an alleyway, panicked and smelling like six different kinds of tea with his symbiote form plastered all over the news.

"Oh, you are being *dramatic*," Slime chides, sliding from shoulder to shoulder, and Charlie groans, tossing his head back in his chair and rolling away from the desk. Slime winds around his arm and settles on the back of his hand. "It is not *that* bad."

"You keep insisting that we *eat* people," Charlie hisses, very wary of the other people present on the facility floor. Sure, they all know who he is and what he can do by now-Quackity is very careful about

making sure as little information gets leaked as possible-but he's not exactly a fan of the way people look at him when they realize he could realistically absorb them when he becomes a twelve-foot-tall slime monster. "And I am *not* a fan of eating people!"

Slime huffs. "People are delicious. You are lying to yourself," it dismisses, and Charlie groans, slumping over his desk. Quackity had probably only given him a desk to keep him stationary, rather than have him following Quackity everywhere. "You are being paranoid. Quackity likes us."

Scoffing, Charlie spins around in his office chair. "I know *that*, I just... miss him, that's all," he mutters. He doesn't really know who he is without Quackity around. Granted, he doesn't really remember much of who he used to be before he'd been introduced to Quackity, but that's besides the point. And now that Quackity is busy with juggling Las Vegas, the school, *and* their villain business, Charlie's been seeing him less and less.

Lightly smacking Charlie in the back of the head, Slime narrows its eyes. "Stop being codependent," it reprimands, and Charlie frowns. He's not being *codependent*. If anyone's the codependent one, it's Slime. Slime smacks him upside the head again. "Do not call me codependent."

"You literally rely on me for sustenance," Charlie tells it flatly. Slime hums, like it's acknowledging he's got a point. Great. The parasite agrees with him. Slime smacks him yet again, and Charlie slumps forward, rubbing the back of his neck. "Dude! What was *that* for?!"

"I do not like being called a parasite," Slime informs him gleefully, and it winds back up Charlie's arm to perch on his shoulder. "We should eat one of the workers. Quackity feeds them well."

A nearby weapons developer squeaks and bolts from the room, and Charlie sighs. "I'm not eating *anyone*," he grits out, and Slime narrows its eyes at him again. Charlie's not having it, though; he's tired of having to share his brain and body with a cannibalistic, lab-grown slime creature. Preemptively cupping his hand over the back of his neck, Charlie glares at Slime. "Do *not* hit me again."

"It is very tempting when you keep insulting me with your thoughts," Slime tells him, and Charlie sighs. "Besides, you are the only one able to bond with me, and *you* agreed to this, so neither of us have much of a choice."

Slime chases a speck of dust for a moment, snapping at it with pointed teeth, and Charlie gives the lab tech whose coat Slime had just taken a chunk out of accidentally an apologetic look. He grabs Slime by its... neck? It's hard to describe. "Cut it out. Quackity from Headquarters is gonna make us move back into that stuffy office, and then *neither* of us will be happy," he tells it, and Slime somewhat settles down, only fidgeting to switch shoulders or idly wind around his bicep.

Fundy comes into the room, an automatic weapon tucked against his back and a pistol strapped to his thigh. Charlie assumes he's just come from doing another hit. "Hey, Charlie," Fundy says, already sounding irritated. Charlie wonders what's gotten *him* this grumpy early in the morning, considering Fundy's not the one dealing with Slime all day, every day.

Nonetheless, Charlie smiles in greeting as Fundy perches atop his desk, giving Slime an affectionate little pat. Figures the two most violent people on their team would get along. "So, how did it go?" he asks politely, and Fundy's scowl deepens.

"It went off without a hitch, of course, I'm a professional. Those suppliers shouldn't be giving us shit anytime soon," he gloats, and Charlie shifts uncomfortably. Fundy talks so casually about killing people, as if snuffing out a life doesn't keep him up at night to the point where his symbiotic roommate has to forcibly make him sleep. Well, Fundy doesn't *have* a symbiotic-the point's been made. Fundy's gone back to scowling, though. "The media isn't paying any fucking attention to it, though."

"Well, yeah, we got Automata, Blaze, and 404 to create a distraction for you," Charlie says, and Slime nods eagerly, doing loop-de-loops around Charlie's torso.

"It was *my* idea," Slime chimes in, and Fundy narrows his eyes. Slime blinks, looks to Charlie, and then looks back to Fundy. "I feel

as if I may have said something wrong.”

Fundy huffs and scuffs the floor with the toe of his boot. “Yeah, no shit, Sherlock. It’s no wonder nobody gives a shit about the hit, *Spider-Man* must’ve been out and about,” Fundy says, saying Spider-Man’s name in a mocking tone, as if the mere idea of the guy is worthy of ridicule. Fundy clicks his tongue. “God, I hate that asshole.”

Charlie’s brows furrow, but Slime seems to agree. “He is very often in the way,” it agrees, much to Charlie’s chagrin. “I have been telling Charlie to go after the little spider and eat him, but Charlie does not want to.”

“Of course I don’t want to *eat* Spider-Man, what is *wrong* with you?!” Charlie hisses, and Slime gives Fundy a look as if to say ‘Look what I have to deal with’ and Charlie *desperately* wishes he could strangle the symbiote right about now. Charlie shakes his head. “Quackity from Headquarters wants him safe, so we have to make sure we-”

“Oh, give it a *rest*, I couldn’t care less what Quackity wants,” Fundy seethes, and Charlie blinks in surprise. “Don’t pretend like you don’t see it! He’s having a little *feelings* fit, he’s letting his emotions get in the way of a logical plan of action! Automata wants Spider-Man *alive*. Not safe, *alive*. He doesn’t give a shit if he comes in shot, stabbed, maimed, or *whatever*, so long as he’s living and breathing. So where the hell does Quackity get off telling *me* how to do *my* job?!”

At that, Charlie bristles. Quackity is a kind, sympathetic, intelligent person who’s absolutely right to want Spider-Man to be okay. Not just *alive*, but okay. “Actually, *I’m* telling you how to do your job,” Charlie tells him in a freak bout of confidence, and Slime looks up at him in utter shock. Charlie’s never pulled rank on Fundy before. “In case you’ve forgotten, I’m in charge here! So when I tell you Quackity from Headquarters wants Spider-Man safe, you *keep him safe*.”

“Babysitting isn’t in my job description,” Fundy says coldly, and Slime worriedly winds around Charlie’s shoulders, ready to encase him at a moment’s notice. But Charlie doesn’t want to pull rank *and*

use the superpowers card. Fundy shakes his head and turns away. "You're confusing. I hate that about you. One minute, you're acting like some starry-eyed toddler, the next you're pretending like you actually *want* to be here, that you're not just here because of your weird loyalty to Quackity."

Slime starts to curl around his jaw, and Charlie tries to calm himself. Slime *wants* to be violent here, but Charlie isn't a violent person. He's not going to cause a fight to break out on the *one* floor Automata had given them to work on. "You're not a very nice person," Charlie grits out, fists clenched, and Fundy snickers.

"Jeez, that's the best you could do? No wonder Quackity put you in charge of me, you're basically an overgrown parrot. Always repeating orders," Fundy jeers, and Slime *really* wants to cause a fight now. Fundy's eyes flicker down to where Slime is defensively seeping around Charlie's neck, and he glares. "I wonder if my new staff can slice through symbiote matter."

"We should find out," Slime snarls, and Charlie takes a deep breath, rolling his shoulders. He *doesn't want a fight*. Slime needs to respect that. As much as Fundy is trying to provoke the two of them, struggling to stand *any* kind of ground would only prove him right. Slime slinks back reluctantly. "You are *lucky* it is Charlie that is my host. A lesser man would have absorbed you for nutrients long ago."

There's that love-hate thing they've got going.

Slime bumps his cheek into Charlie's and perches back on his shoulder. "You need to watch yourself," Charlie warns, not unkindly. "Quackity from Headquarters is getting more and more stressed with each passing day. Antagonizing him and questioning his methods is only going to get you kicked back out. You can't possibly miss only getting hits once every couple of months."

"Vos is a household name now," Fundy tells him, "I'm not worried about anything."

"I never said you were," Charlie says easily, and Fundy's eyes narrow.

Before either of them can say anything, however, one of the lab techs comes up and deposits a tablet into Charlie's hands, flinching at the way Slime grins at her with his rows of pointed teeth as she scuttles away. Charlie's brow furrows, and he looks down at the article. "The little spider is in the hospital?!" Slime gasps, and Charlie's heart drops to his stomach.

Their distraction had backfired.

Quackity is gonna be so mad.

Speak of the devil, the doors to the lab burst open. But Quackity doesn't seem upset or angry; he's got Karl on his arm, eyes shining with pride as he leads him into the room. "*This* is what I've been working on," he says, grinning, and Karl looks around the lab with wide eyes, though Charlie gets the feeling his surprise isn't completely genuine. Quackity brightens up when he catches sight of Charlie; Slime has gone to hide down the back of Charlie's shirt. It's so used to keeping itself a secret around Karl, but Charlie supposes the secret's out now. "Aye! Guys, look who's here! It's Karl!"

"Hi, Karl from the front office!" Charlie chirps, chest puffed out proudly, and Karl gives him a hesitant wave. It would seem that Slime has reemerged. Charlie smiles nervously. "Oh, uh, this is Slime. Don't pay it any mind."

Karl tilts his head curiously. "You call your... Slime... an 'it?'" he asks, and Charlie and Slime nod in sync. It's probably creepy. They really have to stop doing that. Karl hums and turns back to Quackity, shoulders up by his ears. "So... this is where it all goes down, huh?"

Quackity makes an 'eh' sort of motion with his hands. "Well, it is *now*. We used to have an underground facility all to ourselves, but Spider-Man kinda tipped the cops off," he says, and Karl gives him a sympathetic grimace. Quackity slings an arm around Karl's shoulders, and Charlie steps forward. Quackity raises a brow. "What? What is it? I'm a little busy explaining my whole 'technically I'm a supervillain, but I promise I have a good reason' thing here."

"Uh, bad news about Spider-Man," Charlie starts, hands outstretched placatingly, "he kinda... got crushed by a building...?"

Automata threw it at him, s-so I'm sure that's part of his plan, but-

"He got *crushed*?!" Karl gasps, looking incredibly worried, and Charlie nods with a wince as Quackity pulls his phone out and excuses himself from the room. Karl shifts in place and glances warily at Slime before looking back at Charlie. "Is... is he okay?"

"Who, Quackity from the front-from Headquarters? Yeah, he'll be alright, he's just upset because he cares about Spider-Man, y'know?" Charlie reassures him, and Karl gives him a confused sort of smile. Ah. He must've been asking about Spider-Man. "Oh, uh, we have no news."

Karl deflates a little. "That's not good," he mutters, and Slime sniffs at him. Charlie tries to tug him back-it's a futile effort, but he still feels like he should try-and Slime abruptly leans away from Karl, eyes wide. Karl chuckles, and there's something present in his eyes that reminds Charlie very much of Quackity when the gauntlet is activated. "I, uh, don't think your Slime likes me very much."

"I do not," Slime says easily. "This is the first time I have been able to properly meet you, and I am deeply unsettled."

Fundy snorts. Charlie ignores him. "Well, um, this is our lab, it's where we make all of our weapons! Actually, it's where everyone *else* gets their weapons. I don't really need them," Charlie says, and Karl nods along. "No one that works in the rest of the building has access to these floors, Automata made sure of that."

Slime nods eagerly. "Yes, and the people here are very tasty," he says, and Charlie sighs at Karl's obvious horror.

"It's not-we don't actually eat people, Slime just wants to scare you," he promises, and Karl looks relieved at that. It all feels... feigned. Familiar, almost. "A-Anyway, I'm sure Quackity from Headquarters has told you all about the good we're doing with the money we're making!"

"Yeah, he explained the whole plan to me. I gotta say, I'm kinda on board," Karl says, and Charlie blinks in surprise. Karl shrugs. "The idea of taking corruption and twisting it to fit the greater good is

appealing to me, what can I say?"

Fundy snorts. "The only 'greater good' we're serving is Quackity's pockets," he drones, sharpening one of his many knives, and Charlie and Slime both raise their hackles at that.

"You *know* that's not where the money goes, you *know* that, and yet you-please ignore him, he's our office grump," Charlie chirps, joyful tone slightly strained. He's trying to keep a positive outlook here, really, he is, but it gets harder and harder when he's constantly surrounded by people-and symbiotes-that seem to think violence is the answer to everything. "*As I was saying*, we run a tight ship here! No information leaks-well, other than that one time-and no one gets eaten! *Right*, Slime?"

"No one gets eaten," Slime repeats begrudgingly, and Karl chuckles, as if it's an endearing little thing and not a murderous carnivore.

Quackity bustles back into the room, clearly irritated, and Charlie tilts his head in confusion, brows furrowed. "He put the kid in the hospital. He put that kid in the *fuckin'* hospital," he grits out, slamming a hand on a nearby table, and the lab techs at that table collectively jump, eyes glued to his left hand. If Quackity calls the nanotech to him, they may have to suffer through another frustration-fueled power outage.

Gently setting a hand on Quackity's arm, Karl frowns. "Hey, it'll be alright. He'll pull through, he always does," Karl murmurs, and Charlie watches with amazement as Quackity's anger virtually disappears. "What happened? Who'd you call?"

"I called Sappan, who else would I-? I'm sorry, I shouldn't... this isn't your fault, I don't want to snap at you," Quackity mumbles, and Karl gives him an easy smile. Charlie and Slime exchange a look. This kind of bond is one that neither of them have the best understanding of. "I called Sap, I asked him what happened, but he was unconscious when Automata dropped the fuckin' building on the kid. He said he'd talk to the guy, but..."

Charlie winces sympathetically. Talking to Automata about *anything* is like pulling teeth. He puts a hand on Quackity's shoulder. "Don't

beat yourself up about it, we couldn't have known," he says, and Quackity groans.

"I've been so *careful*," Quackity grits out. "I've been dancing down a paper-thin line, here, man, I... I was making sure we got done what we needed to without hurting him *too* badly, and now *our* distraction put him in the hospital. I distracted Sapnap long enough for the kid to get away, I tried to cauterize the blast wound on the fly-don't think I did a great job, but I tried-and now he's in the hospital anyway! I can't fucking *win* here, man!"

Karl's brows furrow. "You hired that PI, though, that's gotta count for *something*," he says, and Quackity hums. Charlie gives the two of them an inquisitive look, and Karl shifts uncomfortably, eyes cast down at the floor. "Uh, Quackity said he was having a hard time with some stuff at Las Nevadas-well, I guess looking back he meant he was trying to fix stuff up *here*, but-he told me he was trying to get some information that was, um, hard to come across, so I recommended an investigator I've heard pretty good things about."

"That reminds me, he finally got something about Schlatt's citizenship status, but I told him to hold back on releasing it. We can't take him down until we've got concrete shit, and I'm not taking him down until I get what I want from him," Quackity says, and Charlie nods eagerly, Slime winding around his wrist in excitement. Fundy looks bored. "They're still working on that, but they're also trying to get information about that project file Automata had us trying to protect, and they're gonna find out Spider-Man's identity for us, too."

Charlie blinks in surprise. "Is that... really a good idea?" he asks, and Quackity looks a little taken aback at that. Of course he is, Charlie never really questions his decisions. But something feels... off about this. "There's probably a reason he doesn't want anyone to know, right?"

Quackity scoffs. "Well, yeah, but *I* want to know so I can keep the kid safe," he protests, and Charlie and Slime exchange a look. Sure, it's nice that Quackity wants to protect Spider-Man, but it's gonna be really hard to do that if they're all still operating under Automata's thumb. "It doesn't matter, I-we haven't heard anything back about

that Guided Evolution thing, but I'm gonna see if I can get the PI access to the systems here."

"If it's really a top-secret project, it's gonna be hard to get that information undetected," Karl warns, and Quackity gives him a weary smile. Charlie stifles a laugh. Yeah, Karl is *definitely* new here. Quackity's done so much work in secret, done so much without Automata knowing already, and this is *nothing*. Karl blinks. "Oh, uh. You guys probably got it covered."

Quackity nods and claps a hand on Karl's back. "Yep! Now, I know you said you don't want to be in the field, and I respect that, it'd cause us all a lot more hassle if you wanted to fight alongside us," he says. "I'd have to introduce you to Automata, Sap and I would have to square all that mistrust and background checking away-it'd be a headache. So you'll be in the loop, but Automata won't *know* you're in the loop."

"And... and Sapnap agreed to this?" Karl asks, and Quackity tilts his head. Charlie's honestly not sure what Karl's talking about; Sapnap's a good guy, he's always super nice to Charlie and he makes Quackity laugh a lot. At their obvious confusion, Karl shrugs. "Isn't he at least a *little* hesitant to be all... double agent?"

At that, Quackity laughs sadly. "It, uh... it took a lot of convincing," he admits, and Charlie wonders what that means exactly. Sapnap and Automata are close, sure, but not close enough for Sapnap to justify all this, surely. Charlie's still not even sure what Automata's end goal here is. Quackity just waves dismissively and shakes his head. "Doesn't matter. He's still reluctant, but we'll win him over. Right now, he thinks the kid's annoying and in the way-which isn't wrong-but he doesn't want the kid dead, no matter what he says."

"All bark, no bite," Karl jokes. "Well, actually, some bite. A lot of bite. You said he detonated a bomb over Spider-Man's stomach?"

"Unimportant," Quackity huffs, and he turns to Fundy, arms crossed. "You got the hit done, yeah? I don't have to send anyone else out to finish the job, do I?"

Fundy glowers. "Of course I did my fucking job, man," he says, and

Slime snickers quietly. Fundy smacks it, and Charlie frowns. "Shut the fuck up, alien."

"I was produced in a laboratory," Slime hisses, "I am not an alien."

"You just keep telling yourself that," Fundy shoots back.

"Please don't bully the symbiote," Charlie says, exasperated.

"I'll bully the symbiote all I want, you—"

"That's enough," Quackity says firmly, and Fundy falls silent, seething. Quackity sighs and turns to Karl, pinching the bridge of his nose between his fingers. "I'm sorry about them."

Karl just grins. "Nah, it's all good," he says, and Charlie squints down at Slime, who glares right back up at him. Karl claps his hands. "So! You gonna give me the rest of the tour, or...?"

Quackity brightens up, and he eagerly escorts Karl out of the lab. Fundy and Charlie are left alone, and Charlie shifts uncomfortably. "You're not gonna start arguing with Slime again, right? Because I don't think I can hold it off if you *really* make it mad," he warns, and Fundy rolls his eyes.

"Whatever, asshole," he grumbles, "at least I'm not Quackity's prized little pet."

"Charlie is nobody's pet," Slime hisses, winding around Charlie's torso protectively. Slime feigns sniffing at Fundy, and Fundy makes a face. "You reek of the need for validation."

Charlie snorts as he stifles his laughter behind his hand, and Fundy storms off, going over to one of the poor lab techs and taking his embarrassment out on their handiwork. Charlie turns back towards his desk, humming quietly to himself. "I can tell you're curious, y'know," he says, and Slime perks up. Charlie chuckles and pats Slime's head before sorting through a couple of papers.

"I just wonder... where are *you* from? Why did Fundy call you a 'pet?'" Slime asks, and Charlie sighs.

"That's a long story," he murmurs, and Slime gnaws absentmindedly on the corner of the desk, big white eyes blinking up at Charlie. He supposes they've got the time, though. Slime nods eagerly. Charlie leans back in his chair. "So, I guess I should start from the beginning. Not that there's much beginning to begin with. The earliest I can remember is... from a little less than a year ago, actually."

Slime looks curious. "That is... not very long ago," it says, and Charlie nods.

"I've got a weird memory. That's why I have to keep track of where I know people from, and who gets to know where a person is *really* from if they have a secret identity. Otherwise, I might blow somebody's cover," Charlie tells it, and Slime goes back to gnawing on the desk. "I mean, if it weren't for Quackity from Headquarters, I'd probably still be wandering around on the streets with no clue of who I am."

"You owe him the life you have," Slime says, "I can understand that."

Well, of course it can, that's sort of how the whole symbiote thing works. Slime scowls at him, and Charlie laughs. "I'm just saying, you get the reason behind the loyalty, even if some of the things that you're doing aren't exactly what you had planned," he says, and Slime blinks slowly. Ah, right. Neither of them had really ever *had* plans for the future. "Huh. I guess... I guess all we understand is the loyalty part."

Slime bumps its head against Charlie's arm lightly. "Did you not have any hopes for the future before you met Quackity?" it asks, and Charlie blinks. That's... a very intense question.

"Uh, well... I think I was only alone on the streets for, like, three days before Quackity from Headquarters found me and offered to help, so... I guess I just didn't have the time," Charlie says honestly, and Slime hums thoughtfully. "I mean, I *think* I'd like to go somewhere. Maybe back to the States. Have a nice, long vacation. I hear Disney World is pretty cool."

"Will I have to accompany you to this... Disney World?" Slime asks,

skeptical, and Charlie huffs out a laugh.

“Not sure you have much of a choice, buddy,” he says, and Slime grumbles something under its breath.

The doors slam open, Quackity positively fuming as Karl trails back in behind him, and he summons his gauntlet, slamming it into the wall. It leaves a dent. Charlie’s eyes widen, and he looks at Slime. This can’t be good. Quackity is *pissed*.

“That son of a bitch!” he roars, and the gauntlet crackles with electricity as Quackity looks at the nearest group of lab techs, who hurry to sweep their work off of the table they’re using. Once it’s clear, Quackity punches a hole through it. “That motherfucker! I’ll kill him!”

Karl looks helplessly at Charlie, and Slime encases Charlie’s arm as the lights start to flicker. As Quackity’s gauntlet crackles again, Charlie leaps to catch it, making a face at the slight tingle of electricity. Slime is basically the world’s best insulator, so the fact that the voltage Quackity is using is making Charlie feel *anything* means they’re in danger of shutting down the entire building’s power.

Quackity’s chest heaves as he breathes heavily, clearly incredibly frustrated or infuriated or *something*. “We can’t short-circuit the power,” Charlie reminds him, trying to stay calm for both of their sakes, and Quackity nods, lips pressed in a thin line. Definitely infuriated, then. “What happened?”

“Schlatt called,” Quackity says through gritted teeth, and Charlie winces. Ooh, yeah, that’s not exactly ideal. But the concept of the call doesn’t seem to be what’s bothering Quackity, though, it’s something more than that. Quackity looks up at him, eyes red-rimmed. “Automata told him to give the order not to let the ambulances through.”

Charlie stumbles back, and Slime abruptly detaches from his arm, wobbling in the air a little before catching its balance on his shoulder. “What...?” he asks, voice shaky.

Automata had given them all *specific* directions to bring Spider-Man in alive.

What had changed?

Quackity shakes his head. "I don't know why the fuck he wants the kid dead now, but he does," he says, and Charlie wraps his arms around himself. *Slime* doesn't even seem eager to jump onto the potential violence. Quackity looks towards Karl, then at Charlie, eyes determined. "I'm not gonna let that happen. No matter what you do, no matter what orders you're given, you keep that kid *alive*, am I clear?!"

Charlie nods, as does Slime, but Fundy makes no move to agree.

It doesn't sit right with him.

Y'all: "Dammit! He's so fast! He must be laser focused in! The only thing on Moosh's mind right now is *this fic!*"

Me, completely zoning out when I type: Life is like a hurricane~ Here in~ Duckburg~

Anyways, we finally get some bad guy insight! Charlie Slimecicle my beloved, how I have missed writing you.

it's time to talk

Chapter 48: it's time to talk

Tommy wakes up.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Tommy opens his eyes.

His mask is still on, which is rather odd. He can't remember the last time he'd fallen asleep with it on. His body still feels achy-another thing that feels off. Normally, when he wakes up after fights, he's nearly completely healed, but this time is... heavier, in a way.

Tommy grunts as he pushes himself up on his elbows, taking in the sight of the room he's in.

It's a hospital room.

Ah, that's right.

Which means...

Ranboo is asleep in the chair next to his bed, head resting on his folded arms. "He's been here for, like, a day and a half, y'know," Tubbo says from somewhere to his left, and Tommy jumps, eyes wide as he blinks at Tubbo in surprise. Tubbo gives him a weak smile. "It took a shitton of convincing to get him to think you weren't... well. *You*."

Tommy's brows furrow. "Did he see my face?" he asks, voice absolutely shot to hell and back, and Tubbo shakes his head. "Oh, so he... he connected the dots, I'm assuming."

"I did a little bit of a gaslight, gatekeep, girlboss maneuver," Tubbo says with a shrug. "He thinks you're an underground hacker whose servers I once crashed. I told him that's how I found out who you were."

"Well, then he must think I'm way smarter than I actually am," Tommy snorts. Tubbo raises his eyebrows, amused, and Tommy leans back on the pillows, wincing at the ache in his ribs. "Son of a *fuck*, I'm in pain."

Tubbo snorts. "I can imagine. Twelve metric tons of concrete and steel will do that to you," he says, and Tommy blinks. That's... very heavy. Tubbo swallows and turns away. "Your comms cut off, y'know."

Tommy's shoulders slump. "Tubbo, I'm sor-"

"No, no, don't... don't apologize. It's not your fault, I'm not *blaming* you, I just... I couldn't even *comfort* you," Tubbo chokes out, bottom lip trembling as he keeps his gaze on the heart rate monitor. "I thought-for a *second*, it-I thought I'd lost you, and... and I just kept *thinking* that the last thing you'd ever hear was me *panicking*, and I didn't-I *couldn't*..."

Tubbo cuts himself off, shaking his head, and Tommy winces as he sits up further. "Tubbo, it's fine, it's all okay now," Tommy says, and Tubbo gives him an utterly incredulous look. At that, Tommy backtracks. "Well, I mean, it's not *fine*, it's, uh-it's a bit traumatic, innit? But I'm gonna be okay, yeah?"

Tubbo sighs. "You look ridiculous," he says instead of pushing the subject further, and Tommy looks down at himself. It seems that all they'd let him keep was the mask, and Tommy heavily suspects that that's mostly Ranboo's doing. Tubbo grins. "Made you a new suit. Looks the same, and I managed to get Shroud-gave the nurses a bit of a fright when I activated him remotely-but when Puffy and Foolish finally let me out of their sight yesterday, I managed to get it done. m Had to hack the hospital system and lie about who I was coming to visit, but it was worth it."

Tommy's face falls. "Oh, *fuck*, Tubbo, your birthday, I missed it," he

says, and Tubbo waves dismissively. "No, really, I'm so sorry."

"I mean, considering you were in the hospital, actively healing from having *twelve tons of concrete* dropped on you, I will be quick to forgive," Tubbo tells him dryly, and Tommy lets out a weak laugh at that, a hand to the side of his ribs. Tubbo's brows pinch in worry, and he scoots his chair up a little. "I, um... I wanted to ask you if you still-if you want to keep being Spider-Man."

That's come out of nowhere. Tommy's brain takes a second to buffer. "I'm sorry, what?" he says, rather eloquently, and Tubbo's gaze becomes determined.

"You can stop. Nobody would blame you, nobody would be mad at you," Tubbo reassures him, and Tommy shakes his head, trying to process what the fuck Tubbo's on about. "I mean, seriously, man, you're-! You've been getting your ass kicked, endangering yourself, and for what? What's the *point*?! London is shit, *Schlatt* is shit, and things are just gonna keep getting worse until... until it really *is* the last time I get to speak to you."

Tommy honestly feels a bit speechless. He understands why Tubbo's line of thinking is the way it is, really, he does. But he can't just... abandon the city. Without him, nobody else stands in the way of Automata, Blaze, 404, and the rest of them taking over the city completely. "Tubbo, I-I get why you're concerned," he starts, and Tubbo gives him a wounded sort of expression. "But without Spider-Man, *no one* is safe anymore."

"And *with* Spider-Man, you'll never be safe again," Tubbo says urgently, and Tommy resists the urge to scream in frustration. "Dude, Techno got *arrested* because he punched a cop in the *face* trying to get to you. The only reason Ranboo was able to break free from the barrier was because the cops weren't even doing their jobs *right*! They'll keep letting you solve their problems for them, they'll keep screwing you over, and none of them even *care*! I had to be the one to bully them into doing their fucking jobs!"

"That's fine to be angry about! It's okay to be frustrated with that! Your feelings about this situation are valid!" Tommy snaps back, and Tubbo blinks. "It feels like you're *hearing* me, but you're not

listening. I *like* being Spider-Man! I like helping people, I do! If I give up this responsibility, this entire *half* of my identity, I won't feel like myself anymore, and I just think you need to respect that about me! But we can open a dialogue and talk about it further if it's really bothering you, because I understand why it would!"

"Good!" Tubbo shouts. "I would love to give you more insight into my perspective on this situation so that we don't miscommunicate and end up unnecessarily mad at each other!"

"Great!" Tommy yells back. "I think that's really mature of you, and I'm happy that you're taking my suggestion!"

"It was a good suggestion, of course I'm taking it!"

"Well, let me know when you want to start so that I make sure I'm not interrupting you, because I know that it makes you irritated when I do, and I want to make sure I'm cognizant of your boundaries!"

"That's very nice of you, and I appreciate it when you take my feelings into consideration! I feel like sometimes you're not the best with that, so I really do think that shows the personal growth that you've accomplished!"

"I'm glad that you've noticed! I'm very proud of myself, and I specifically asked my therapist to teach me how to listen more effectively because I know that it bothers you sometimes!"

"Thank you! I really appreciate that! It just goes to show how good of a friend you are!"

"I'm very relieved that you think I'm a good friend, because I doubt myself sometimes! I don't have the highest self-esteem right now, so that's actually really nice to hear!"

"You deserve to feel good about yourself! You're a good person!"

"Sometimes it feels like I'm not doing enough, and I really want to ask for validation, but I'm scared that that's an inherently selfish act!"

"It's not! I'm happy to make you feel confident in yourself and your abilities because I believe in you wholeheartedly!"

"Your support means the world to me!"

"*You* mean the world to me!"

"You mean the world to *me*!"

"Why are you angrily yelling nice things at each other?!"

Tommy and Tubbo pause, glancing over at Ranboo who, evidently, had woken up at some point during their... well, Tommy supposes it can't really be considered an *argument*. "Uh... I don't know," Tubbo says, a laugh lacing his words, and Tommy stifles a snort behind his hand.

Ranboo turns to Tommy, eyes wide. "I-I didn't mean to fall asleep! It's just that-well, see, Tubbo got here, and I was really tired from staying up to make sure no one took your mask off, so I figured a nap wouldn't hurt," he blurts, and Tommy puts out his hands in what he hopes is a placating manner.

"Woah, hey, it's alright, man, I'm not mad or anything," Tommy reassures him, and Ranboo nods, still looking a bit nervous. Tommy reaches out to put a hand on his shoulder, making a face at the IV sticking out of his hand. "Thank you. For everything. I mean it."

"Y-Yeah, dude, of course, I wasn't gonna let anyone mess with your identity," Ranboo says, and Tommy gives his shoulder a light squeeze in thanks. Ranboo looks over at Tubbo. "Uh. Sorry about... missing your birthday yesterday."

Tubbo waves him off. "Don't worry about it. An emergency is an emergency. I *will* be expecting multiple presents to make up for it, though," he says easily, and as soon as Tommy starts to speak up to agree, The Sense tingles at the back of his mind. Tommy sits up properly, wary, and Tubbo glances at him. "What is it? What's wrong?"

A doctor enters the room. Tommy relaxes. "Came down as fast as I could, sorry for the delay," he says, and Tommy smiles awkwardly, realizing the moment he does it that the doctor can't actually see it. The doctor blinks at Tubbo. "I see you have another visitor, then?"

"You should get better security for your online systems," Tubbo says in lieu of an actual answer, and Tommy laughs nervously.

"Don't worry, we know each other," he says, trying very hard to be as vague as possible, and the doctor nods as he snaps a pair of gloves on. Tommy's a little surprised at that; he'd thought he'd just be able to leave with no fuss. The doctor takes out his stethoscope. "Uh, how long is this gonna take...? Not to be rude, it's just-it's Christmas Eve, see, and I was hoping to see my family. Oh, also, how much is this gonna cost? I-I don't exactly have any proof of insurance on me right now."

The doctor smiles at him as he places the stethoscope on Tommy's back. "Deep breath in for me," he says, and Tommy complies. The doctor nods and moves it to Tommy's chest. "Right, well, don't worry about paying anything, Spider-Man. You saved my daughter and her son from a burning building ages ago, this is the least I can do. Another deep breath, please."

Tommy takes another deep breath. "Are you sure? I'd hate to trouble you," he says, and the doctor nods, moving the stethoscope a bit to the right. Tommy preemptively takes a deep breath, and the doctor hums. "Well? Everything okay? Can I go home?"

"You seem to be reasonably healthy again, which is odd," the doctor says. "Your heart rate when you arrived was the lowest I've seen in my entire career, and you were still somehow alive. It was like that until now, I'm assuming. Is it alright if I check your ribs? They were broken just last night."

Tommy nods, and the doctor presses a hand gently on his torso. It's a little painful, sure, but it's a dull thud of a thing, not an earth-shattering, searing kind of pain like it had been when he'd been trapped under the concrete. The doctor steps back, alarmed. "If you're freaked out by how fast I healed, I hope it eases your mind to know that this whole, like... rapid regeneration thing is a superpower," Tommy says, and the doctor huffs out an astonished laugh. "Hate to break it to you, doc, but I'm not a medical marvel, I'm just part spider."

"Well, you know your own body and its limits, and since I'm not

exactly versed on superhuman biology, I'd say that if you're feeling ready enough to leave, you can," the doctor says, and Tommy grins. Thank fucking God. The doctor glances to Ranboo and Tubbo, who have both been watching with incredulous attention. "I don't suppose either of you have brought him a change of clothes?"

"I forgot your new suit," Tubbo says, eyes widening in realization, and Tommy sighs. Well, looks like he's swinging home in a hospital gown. Tubbo perks up. "Oh! No need to panic, I brought your duffel. You should have a change of clothes in here somewhere, right?"

"Yeah, it should be in there somewhere," he says, and Tubbo takes out his spare clothes, folding them neatly before setting them down on the hospital bed.

The doctor's brows furrow. "You don't have a jacket?" he asks, and Tommy shakes his head. The doctor holds up one finger and leaves the room, and Tommy blinks. Ranboo and Tubbo look just as confused as he feels. The doctor comes back into the room, a puffy blue coat folded over one arm. "Here, take mine. I've another at home."

That's awfully nice of him. "Thanks, mate," Tommy says.

"No problem," the doctor tells him. "Anything for our friendly neighborhood Spider-Man."

Tommy is rather nervous to see Techno.

Sure, Techno had gotten out on bail with very little legal trouble-they dropped the charges against him since they couldn't prove he'd *meant* to punch the officer in the general chaos-but Tommy's not exactly looking forward to talking about what had happened. But Techno's supposed to drive him to therapy today, which Tommy is *also* nervous about, considering he hasn't been in ages, and Bad had carved out an hour on Christmas Eve just to fit him in.

Tommy's standing on the curb outside of a more obscure section of London, hands firmly in the pockets of the puffy blue jacket. "Fuck,

s'cold as shit," he mutters to himself, and thankfully, it doesn't take long for Jubilee-thank fuck Techno had taken Wil's car instead-to pull up to the curb. Tommy lets himself in the passenger's seat, teeth chattering. He feels more exhausted than usual, which is probably a sign that his body is not, in fact, equipped to handle the cold. "Ayup, Tech- *oomph!*"

Techno's practically tackled him from across the console, clutching at Tommy as though it's the last time he'll ever see him. "God, kid, you can't *do* that," he says, voice unusually shaky, and Tommy sits still in shock for a moment before returning the hug. Techno's grip is crushing, and Tommy hisses in pain as the hug starts to strain his ribs. Techno pulls back immediately, eyes wide. "Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine, just-ribs are still bruised, big man," Tommy tells him, a wobbly smile on his face, and Techno nods. "I know you want to talk, and I respect that, I want to talk to you, but... I'm not sure I'm *ready* to talk, if that makes sense."

Techno gnaws at his bottom lip, clearly worried, but he nods. "Yeah, I get that. I'm just... I'm really glad you're okay, Tommy," he says, and Tommy gives him a strained smile. Techno clears his throat and turns back towards the wheel, glancing over to make sure Tommy's buckled himself in. "Right, so, uh... I'm takin' you to therapy, yeah?"

"Yep," Tommy says.

"Great," Techno hums.

This is awkward.

Tommy taps his fingers on his legs idly, wondering if he should turn on the radio or something, if only to relieve this weird tension. "So, uh... how was jail?" he asks, stupidly, and Techno swerves the car a little. Tommy winces. "Well, I mean, you don't *have* to answer-"

"They just held me at the station," Techno says, "I didn't *actually* go to, like, prison."

"Right."

“Yeah.”

It’s awkward again.

Tommy checks his phone. He’s got a couple of missed calls and texts, but Tommy’s fairly certain that Tubbo and Techno had made an excuse for him, considering the notifications taper out around six hours after the building had been dropped on him. “Thanks for, uh... for covering for me,” he says, and Techno nods. “And for driving me here.”

Techno nods again.

They sit in silence.

Tommy hates this.

Eventually, Techno pulls up to the building, and Tommy sighs. “Call me when your appointment’s over so I can drive you back. Mom’s worried about you,” Techno says, and Tommy gives him a shaky smile, hand on the door.

“Right. Um. Love you,” Tommy says, and Techno blinks at him in surprise. Tommy shrugs. “Figured I oughta say it more often. The whole near-death experience thing might happen again, and, uh, I think you should, um... you should know that you’re a really good big brother, and I love you.”

“Love you too,” Techno says, sounding a little stunned, and Tommy gives him an awkward wave before stepping out of the car and walking up to the door of the building.

When he opens it, he’s pretty surprised to see a good amount of boxes-not gifts, they’re boxes made for moving-in the lobby. “Oh! Tommy! You’re here a few minutes early,” Bad says from the doorway, and Tommy beams at him. Bad chuckles, a hand on the back of his neck. “Sorry about the mess, a new therapist is renting out the office down the hall from mine. Her name’s Puffy.”

“Puffy’s renting out an office here?” Tommy asks, eyes wide. Bad looks equally surprised, but sure enough, Puffy comes bustling through the doorway. “Uh, hey, Puffy.”

"Tommy! Hey! What're you doing here?" she asks, smiling gently.

"I get therapized here," he says, pointing at Bad, and Puffy nods slowly, like she's only just realized this. Tommy turns to Bad, suddenly feeling rather embarrassed. "So... shall we get to it, then?"

Bad quickly moves to hold the door open for Tommy, and the two of them make their way to his office. Tommy slumps down into his usual spot, and Bad takes out his clipboard. "Well, first things first, merry Christmas Eve," Bad says, and Tommy winces.

"Yeah, uh, sorry about asking for an emergency appointment, but I, uh... I kinda need it," he admits, and Bad waves his apology off. Tommy's brow furrows in concentration. "Right, well, um... I think I... see, the thing is, I just had something horrible happen to me-don't give me that face, big man, you know I can't tell you what it is-and the fun part is that I'm *pretty* sure I have more things to add to that list of... what'd you call them again?"

"Triggers?" Bad asks, and Tommy snaps his fingers.

"That's the one! Sounds like a real serious thing though, makes it feel like a big deal when, honestly, it's not," Tommy says hurriedly, and Bad raises a brow skeptically as he writes something down. Tommy kicks his legs out absentmindedly. "Y'know, I've got this habit of flinching whenever I hear sirens now."

Bad seems concerned. "Does this-and forgive me if this is a little blunt, but-does this have anything to do with what happened to your dad?" he asks gently, and Tommy rolls his eyes.

"No, this is a *different* horrible thing that's happened, Bad, keep up," Tommy tells him, and Bad nods, writing something else down. Tommy hums. "Though, I suppose I *did* get stuff from that as well, I've got *loads* of trouble getting in Techno's car now."

"*Techno's* car specifically?" Bad asks, and Tommy nods. "What is it about Techno's car that makes you feel like that?"

Tommy huffs out a laugh. "It's 'cuz I was in that car when I... well, we drove to the hospital in it," he says, and he has *got* to be more

careful. He can't just say he's Spider-Man. "But, um, whenever I get in the car, it's like... it's like I'm *back* there, it's like I'm in that moment, like I can't get out of it. It usually helps if Techno's talking to me the whole time-like if he's reminding me that we're not *actually* back there, y'know? Making him do that every time I'm in his car seems terribly inconvenient, though, so could you tell me how to fix it?"

Bad seems overwhelmed at the information; Tommy thinks that's rather ironic. "Tommy, I don't know if there *is* a way to 'fix' that," he says honestly, and Tommy's shoulders slump a little in disappointment. "You can try to take small steps-like the reminder of where you are-but there's no guarantee that the trauma response will ever really go away."

That's... disappointing to hear.

Swallowing, Tommy looks away. "Well, that's a bit crap," he says as he chuckles weakly, and Bad gives him a sympathetic smile. Tommy laughs, a little louder, a little shakier. "That's not-s'not exactly *fair*, is it? I go a-and I do all these good things, I try to be as much of a good person as I can be, and the universe tells me, 'Fuck you, have some wounds that won't ever heal,' and that's not-that's not fucking *fair*."

"It's unfair," Bad agrees, "but all you can do is work to heal yourself, as much as you can."

"You don't fucking get it," Tommy snaps, "my dad's in a fucking *coma* because of me, I've just gone and scared the shit out of everyone I love, and you're telling me to *heal*?! That's a fucking joke! I can't even *talk* about half the shit I've gone through! I couldn't even talk to *Techno* about it, and he already knows everything! But somehow, *somehow* I'm supposed to just-what, am I supposed to fuckin' snap back to it and be okay?! Whoop-dee-fucking-doo, I'll just grin and bear it, then! Not like it'll get any fucking worse than it already has!"

Bad appears to be at a loss for words, other than the dazed 'language' that comes out.

Tommy seethes silently in his seat.

"Well," Bad starts, gently, "if you feel like it can't get worse, then it can only get better, right?"

Tommy narrows his eyes. "Fuck is that supposed to mean?"

Bad sighs at the swear, but he pushes on. "Excuse me if this comes off as a little crass, but... it's not like your dad can fall into a *double* coma. He's gonna wake up. That'll be better, won't it?" he says, and Tommy shifts in his seat. "Your family's probably not scared anymore now that they know you're here and you're safe. That's better, right?"

"That's the easy stuff, though, that's-it's guaranteed fixes, it's not the same," he mutters, and Bad nods.

"That's true. But if you're only looking to heal from the most difficult parts of your life-if you try to only pay attention to the deepest wounds, if you only track progress by how much you've 'fixed' yourself, by how deep those wounds still are, you'll end up forgetting about the parts of you that are still intact, the parts of you that have changed as a result of those wounds, for the better or for the worse. The work that you've done to help the small things... just like trauma between people is incomparable, the differences in the traumas you've experienced, the ones you've adapted to and the ones you have yet to recover from, they're incomparable too," Bad tells him. Tommy looks down at his hands, at the faint white lines of long-ago rope burn. "If you let yourself be consumed by the grief of what's been lost, you neglect to cherish what's been found, what's been healing."

Tommy had stood atop brick buildings again. He'd stopped flinching when people had entered rooms unexpectedly. He had put his mask back on again. Parts of him have healed, even if he'd been too busy to notice. "Does it ever get better?" he asks, still staring at his palms. The skin around his wrists is slightly red. Stress response. Deep breaths.

"I don't know the future," Bad says, "but I *do* know that you're a good kid with a big heart, you're determined as all heck, and there's no

doubt in my mind that you'll be okay, even if you have to go toe-to-toe with the universe to do it."

"I'm so tired of fighting," Tommy whispers. "Everyone... they all want me to stop. But I'm doing the *right thing*, aren't I? I'm *helping* people. I don't have a *choice*, I... if I don't do this, I won't know who I am anymore. This... this *part* of me, it's so-I wouldn't be myself without it, but nobody gets that, they all just think I'm... stubborn."

"Why do you feel like you wouldn't be yourself if you didn't do... whatever it is you're doing?" Bad asks, jotting something down on his clipboard.

"I'm not *just* Tommy anymore, I'm-I have more responsibilities, I can't just *ignore* that because everyone's worried, I... I can't *abandon* that," he says, and Bad's brows furrow. Tommy shakes his head. "It's not important. Did you know Techno got arrested? Yeah, he punched a cop."

Bad blinks. "Every time," he mutters. "I get whiplash *every time* you do that."

Tommy raises his brows skeptically. "How are you not used to me repressing my emotions by now?" he scoffs, and Bad glares at him as he writes something else down. "So, yeah, he used up his phone call on Wil, but turns out, him and Sally-that's Wil's girlfriend, by the way-they switched phones by accident, so she was the one to go bail him out. They didn't even charge him or anything, and he left a huge bruise on the cop's *face!* Techno's so cool."

For a moment, Bad looks as though he's going to say something very serious. "You know, I *should* be telling you that idolizing that kind of behavior is unhealthy, but... that *does* sound kinda cool," Bad concedes, and Tommy beams at him.

"Fuck *yeah* it is!"

"Language."

Hello!!! I hope everyone that celebrates had a lovely Christmas, and I hope those who don't celebrate had a lovely Saturday :D

There are Multiple Pieces of Fanart for this fic now, so I've decided to make a list to put at the end of each chapter because y'all really should go see them, they're phenomenal!!!

[This art](#) is based off of ch42 and is absolutely heart-wrenching ;-;

[This art](#) showing The Sense going off is super cool!!

[This interpretation of Tommy's suit](#) is also ridiculously awesome :D

[This design of Automata](#) makes me go absolutely feral omg

since we've no place to go

Chapter 49: since we've no place to go

It's Christmas, but Tommy's not exactly feeling the spirit of the season.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Christmas really sucks when your dad is in a coma.

Granted, Tommy's just now stirring awake, eyes fluttering open at the quiet, jazzy tunes that start to fill the room. The lighting is soft enough that he doesn't squint as he wakes, and Tommy is suddenly affronted with the smell of fresh food and baked goods. Well, that and someone's clearly made coffee-the good kind, like they'd brought it from home.

Tommy stirs, and the small bits of chatter that had been floating through the room die down a little. "Shh, I think he's waking up," Wilbur whispers, and Tommy yawns, making a face as he stretches his arms above his head. A mug of something-coffee, maybe hot chocolate judging by the smell of it-is thrust under his nose. "Good morning and merry Christmas, Toms!"

Blinking up at Wilbur, Tommy gingerly takes the mug and has a sip. It's delicious. "Thanks," he mumbles, "this is good."

Kristin ruffles his hair as Tommy takes another sip. "Merry Christmas, kiddo! Y'know, Santa usually only delivers presents if you've got a tree, but I heard he made an exception for us," she jokes, pointing over at the heap of parcels piled on the rolling table. Tommy huffs out a weak laugh. She nudges his shoulder. "There also may or may not be some visitors on their way."

Tommy raises his brows, amused, only to have a Santa hat abruptly shoved on his head. "Get into the spirit of things," Techno says as Tommy lifts the fur lining of the hat up to see. He's wearing what has *got* to be the ugliest Christmas sweater Tommy's ever seen. "You say anything and I burn your presents."

Tommy puts his hands up in surrender, and Kristin starts to string a garland across the foot of Phil's hospital bed. To be honest, Tommy doesn't really understand how they can all be so chipper; he feels absolutely miserable right now, and it only worsens when he looks over at Phil's still-comatose face. Wilbur gently places a plate of warm pastries on the bedside table closest to Tommy and gives him a soft smile.

Idly, Tommy realizes that the music drifting through the room is Christmas music. "Wil, can you hand me the hooks for the stockings?" Kristin asks, and Wilbur nods, heading over towards a bag by the door. Tommy swirls the coffee around in the mug. He feels so tired, so... numb, and he doesn't want to be the only one in the room that's not excited about Christmas. Kristin glances over at him, brows furrowed. "Anything we can get you, Tommy?"

Tommy shakes his head. "No. Thanks, though," he murmurs, and he keeps watching the coffee turn in a little whirlpool motion. This is frustrating; he thought he'd been getting better. No, he *had* been getting better. But now, every time a new song comes on, every time he glances at the little decorations Wilbur is stringing up, every time he looks up to watch Techno steadily decorate a gingerbread house, Tommy is reminded that Phil can't enjoy it with them.

"Kid, come help me with this," Techno tells him, and Tommy chugs the rest of the coffee before getting up from his chair. He looks back at Phil, then joins Techno. He's promptly handed the piping bag, and Techno glances over at Wilbur and Kristin to make sure they're not listening before lowering his voice. "You can make the roof look like a spider-web if you want."

Tommy smiles sadly. "Nah. Let's just... build it," he says, and Techno looks kind of worried. "I'm kinda not feeling it, y'know? Plus, I-I didn't really sleep well, and I worked through some *shit* in therapy yesterday. Sorry."

"Yeah, that's-it's okay, don't apologize," Techno tells him, holding up the pieces of the house so that Tommy can glue them together with the icing. He's trying his hardest to be careful; between his super-strength and the shakiness of his hands, Tommy doesn't want to fuck this up. Techno clears his throat. "Uh, so... do you wanna talk about... whatever it is that you talked about? I'm here for you, so, um, don't... you're not in this alone, okay?"

Tommy accidentally pops the bag of frosting. "Shit, fuck, I'm sorry," he whispers, trying to keep the quiver in his voice to a minimum, but there's a slight crack there anyway. Tommy blinks rapidly and sniffs, setting the destroyed bag down and stepping back. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have-I'm gonna go wash my hands."

He turns tail and heads to the bathroom, ignoring the stares of everyone else in the room-except for Phil, but that can't be helped. Tommy shuts the door softly behind him and proceeds to slide down the wall until he's in a heap on the floor, trying desperately to keep his breathing steady. He doesn't need to make this everyone else's problem, doesn't need to ruin their Christmas more than he probably already has.

Tommy just wishes Phil would wake up.

If he'd woken up even a day ago, this would be so much more bearable.

Well, Tommy supposes they'd have to talk about the whole Spider-Man thing, but that's neither here nor there. It's not as if Phil knows the whole extent of things, so it's not likely he'd force Tommy to stop being Spider-Man. Unless Techno or Tubbo try to convince Phil that it's worse than it actually is.

Tommy's not denying that it's bad, of course. Having a building dropped on top of you really gives you a sense of perspective, after all. But it's definitely not bad enough that it makes him *not* want to continue being Spider-Man. He's still not entirely sure how he's going to explain all of this to Phil, but judging by how long it's taken him to wake up so far, Tommy feels like he's got a decent amount of time to make a game plan.

He doesn't want to consider the possibility that Phil won't wake up.

That would be absurd.

His dad is supposed to be there, supposed to be *alive*. He's supposed to be enjoying Christmas with the rest of the family, not lying motionless in an uncomfortable bed in a stuffy room. That's not what Phil deserves. And yeah, while Tommy *does* acknowledge the fact that it hadn't been his fault, the grief that still bubbles in his gut occasionally seems to continue to have trouble grasping that concept.

Today should be fun, shouldn't it? Today should be fun and full of warmth, today should be a day that Tommy's been looking forward to, a day that he's excited for.

So why does he feel so fucking miserable?

His shoulders hunch up by his ears, and he bites down on his bottom lip as it starts to tremble. He can't ruin today. Everyone else needs this; something cheery and bright to look forward to is what they need right now, and Tommy's not going to be the one to break that apart.

He just needs to calm himself down, that's all. Tommy just needs to take a few deep breaths and take a little time to compartmentalize. He'll do the breathing counts, he won't let himself cry, won't let his eyes get red and puffy. He doesn't want anyone to know that he's as upset as he is, doesn't want anyone to feel anything less than joyful because of him.

There's still royal icing on his hands.

It's uncomfortable.

It's uncomfortable enough that it gives him something else to focus on.

Tommy inhales shakily and stands, turning on the tap. He'll stare at the stream of water as it weaves through the gaps between his fingers, as it swirls down the drain. He'll let the only sensation he allows his brain to register to be the suds of the soap, the feeling of

cleanliness as the royal icing dissolves. It's mostly sugar, after all.

The skin around his wrists is angry, red, and raised. *Stress response, stress response, you've overreacted so badly your body thinks you're in legitimate danger.* He's not in danger here-hell, he's in a *hospital*, there couldn't be a safer place for him to be-and there's certainly no danger present here. There won't be. Today will be fine.

Tommy will be fine. He'll be fine, he'll have a nice Christmas with his family in his dad's hospital room, and he can mope as much as he fucking wants to tomorrow. He just has to wait this out until tomorrow. Turning the tap back off and gently drying his hands, Tommy takes a few deep breaths as he absentmindedly flexes his fingers.

He makes the grave mistake of looking directly at his reflection in the mirror above the sink.

Every time he sees himself in a mirror, it's like he's looking at someone that feels less and less like himself. His eyes are tired, so tired. They're duller, sharper, like they're expecting to seek out danger and conquer it. The bags under them are no joke. They're that deep sort of purple that comes with a bruise; Tommy wouldn't be surprised if there's an actual bruise buried under there somewhere. There's a sort of discomfort there, like he shouldn't be in his own body, like the eyes he's looking at aren't his own, they're not *supposed* to be his own.

There are light scars, barely noticeable unless you're *really* looking for them, scattered across his cheeks and his nose and his jaw and *everywhere*. His skin hasn't seen the sun in so long that he *feels* translucent, feels nauseated at the sight of the blood vessels so prominent on his eyelids and the previously unseen veins crawling their way down the slope of his neck. There are still some cuts and scrapes hidden by his oversized jumper-a favorite trick of his, it really hides injuries well from prying eyes-but Tommy's fairly certain that most of the physical damage from his last fight has been healed.

He is blemish-free for the most part, but all he can see is a false

version of himself, battered, bruised, and broken.

Tommy is not broken.

Tommy is not *broken*.

Tommy is *not* broken.

Tommy is not broken.

The sentence fits weirdly in his mouth.

It's hard to work the syllables out in his head. It's even more difficult to work out what he wants to emphasize. Should he insist that he isn't broken, or is he trying to insist that despite everything that's happened to him, it's still him, still *Tommy* staring back at himself through the mirror? He knows, logically, that both of these things are true; he is not broken, and he is himself. Of course he's the person he's always been-a changed version, changed throughout not just being Spider-Man, but by everything that's ever happened to him.

Spider-Man does not break.

Spider-Man does not break.

That fits better.

Maybe this is how he can compartmentalize it. Maybe he can separate Tommy from Spider-Man, work it out so that he can let *Tommy* be hurt and vulnerable while *Spider-Man* never falters, never fails to get back up again. *Tommy* can need support from the people he loves, and *Spider-Man* can be that same support for the city.

Idly, there's a mild voice in the back of his head that sounds eerily like Bad telling him that this isn't the healthiest answer.

But it's *an* answer.

Tommy is so tired of not having any answers.

They still know close to nothing about Guided Evolution. Tubbo still

can't get in through the firewalls and protective encryptions. Tommy knows almost nothing about the experiment that had made him superhuman, and that terrifies him. Without any further information, they have no idea what it had been meant for, what it probably still *is* for. There's no way for Tommy to know what he *is*.

Even now, he doesn't have a fucking clue as to why Quackity, Charlie, and Fundy are acting as supervillains. He supposes he may never know. Tommy feels like that's unfair, somehow, as if trying to defeat them gives him the right to know why the fuck they're doing this to him. More than anything, Tommy wants to know how they can live with themselves. How they can level city blocks and destroy power grids and shops and *kill* people. How they can do that, how they can beat him to a bloody *pulp*, and still act as though they have any right to his kindness, to his trust, to his *friendship*.

He doesn't know when Phil will wake up, and the lack of that answer is easily the worst of the bunch.

But right now, he has his family-those of them that are conscious, anyway-and they're all waiting for him to go back out there and join them.

That feels like an answer. A solution.

Tommy takes another deep breath and leaves the bathroom, blinking in surprise at the presence of Sally, Puffy, Tubbo, and Foolish. "Merry Christmas!" Tubbo says, practically launching himself in Tommy's direction, and Tommy catches him with a soft *oof*.

"You're so clingy," he mumbles, and Tubbo just squeezes him tighter. Tommy appreciates the silent understanding. Tubbo's good about that. He's not going to bring it out into the open or force Tommy to talk about it; he's gotten better with that stuff. Just knowing that Tubbo *knows*, the pressure of his arms working as a sort of silent message that he doesn't blame Tommy for feeling less than thrilled today... it's the best comfort Tommy could've asked for. "Alright, get off, let me say hi."

"Whatever you say, bossman," Tubbo says, giving Tommy's arm

one last squeeze. Tommy doesn't know why, but the fact that Tubbo had waited for *him* to be ready to pull away makes him feel a little emotional. Tubbo nudges his side. "Sally said it was Wil's idea to have us over."

"Thanks, Wil," Tommy says, and Wilbur smiles softly. Tommy moves forward to give Foolish a fist bump and Puffy a hug. "It's... really great to see you."

"Thanks for having us," Puffy tells him, nothing but fondness in her voice, and Tommy nods, pulling back to give Sally an awkward wave.

Sally's got her hair up again, and Tommy wonders how the fuck she'd managed to put jingle bells on her hair tie. The tips of her curls are bleached, and Tommy raises his eyebrows. "I see you've dyed your hair," he says, and Wilbur comes up to wrap an arm around Sally's waist. Tommy makes a face. Affection? Sickening.

Laughing, Sally elbows Wilbur. "It was his idea. We both really liked the red, so I'm making it permanent. It's gonna take me at least another bleaching session-not to *mention* the toning and the conditioning," she sighs, and Wilbur looks a bit embarrassed.

"I didn't know how much *work* it was gonna be for you! But I helped," he says, and Sally rolls her eyes affectionately. Wilbur grimaces. "Admittedly, I *did* forget you were seeing your parents this morning, so my timing might not have been the best."

Kristin hides a laugh behind her hand, and Sally nods slowly. "Yes, they were just *thrilled* when I showed up to take pictures with my extended family with yellow hair," she says to Kristin, and Wilbur groans, slinking back off towards where Foolish is helping Techno piece the gingerbread house back up. Sally shakes her head and gives Kristin a long-suffering look. "It took me *so long* to find box dye that would work with my hair."

"Oh, I know a brand that's really great for toning with box bleach," Kristin tells her, brightening up, and Sally beams. "And just so you know, if you're going with a darker red, you won't have to do another bleach cycle."

Sally's eyes widen. "Oh my *God*, you're right! I'm going with, like, a smokey sort of thing-was initially gonna go for a salmon pink, but that's a bit on the nose, innit?" she jokes, and Kristin chuckles. Tommy doesn't get it.

"Salmon?" he asks, and Sally nods.

"My last name means 'salmon' in French, kiddo," she explains, and Tommy bursts out laughing. Sally rolls her eyes playfully, and both she and Kristin turn to look over at the gingerbread house crew.

Kristin shakes her head in fond exasperation as Wilbur attempts to use a gumdrop to line the walls with icing as Foolish holds them steady. "God, what even *happened* over there?" she asks.

Tommy's face falls a little at that. Sally nudges his side and nods towards a plastic bag in one of the empty chairs. "Don't worry. Wil texted while I was picking up Puffy and her lot, so I got a backup from the shop down the road. It's got the *good* sweets, none of that plasticky-tasting shit."

Tommy snorts. "Thanks," he says, and she ruffles his hair. Tommy glances over at Puffy and Kristin, who are currently piling presents in a stack that starkly reminds Tommy of a game of Tetris gone horribly wrong. "Holy *shit*, that's a fuckload of presents."

"We *could* use a hand," Puffy admits with a sheepish grin, and Tommy heads over to help them keep the pile steady. It's surprisingly light-for him, at least, he's got no clue how it is for Puffy and Kristin-and Tommy has no problem making sure nothing's falling or shifting out of place as the two of them work on stacking them. Once the supply of presents has run out, the three of them step back to admire their handiwork. Puffy dusts her hands off. "Nice! Nothin' like a little teamwork to get the job done."

"You're starting to sound like a primary school teacher," Tubbo pipes up from where he's curled up with his laptop, and Foolish and Tommy both laugh at that. Puffy shoots him a playful glare, but she drags Techno and Foolish out from the room, presumably to go get *more* shit. Tommy settles into the chair beside Tubbo and glances at the screen. Tubbo looks up at where Kristin, Wilbur, and Sally have

gathered around the gingerbread house, and he lowers his voice to a near-whisper. "I'm still trying. I've got nothing, though, bossman, I'm sorry."

Tommy shakes his head. "Don't... don't worry about that today, okay? That's a not-Christmas problem," he says, voice trembling slightly, and Tubbo nods, immediately putting away his laptop with his brows furrowed. Tommy waves him off. "I'm alright. I just... don't want to talk about *that* stuff today."

Tubbo knocks his knuckles against Tommy's shoulder. "You got it. Guess I can't give a certain *someone* his *real* gift yet, then," he teases, and *oh*, how Tommy is so easily swayed at the promise of free shit.

"Gimme," Tommy says, making grabby hands, and Tubbo laughs, turning towards his backpack and handing Tommy a little wrapped box. Tommy rips open the wrapping paper and lifts the cover of the box, blinking in surprise at the sight of two new web shooters. "Oh, cool! Did the old ones break?"

Tubbo makes an 'eh' sort of motion with his hand. "I mean, yes *and* no. They were a little beat up, I could've fixed them, but I figured you should have access to more web settings *without* having Shroud on the field. Plus, they'll be *your* webs now, not the synthetic ones, so you'll pretty much never run out," Tubbo says, gesturing wildly, and Tommy's eyes go wide.

"That's so fucking cool," he whispers, but he slams the lid back on, shoving the box in his pocket when he sees Wilbur turn towards them. "Wil! When are we opening gifts?"

"Oh, uh, probably when Puffy, Techno, and Foolish get back with the food," he says, looking back to Kristin for confirmation. She nods, and Wilbur smiles as he raises a brow at Tommy, amused. "Impatient already, I see."

"Yeah, well, I'm excited, fuck off," Tommy says, cheeks heating up a little in embarrassment. He doesn't just want to *get* presents, he wants to see everyone else's reactions to *his*. There are, of course, a couple that he'd bought on that trip with Techno—he's pretty sure

Techno had paid for Tommy's as well as his own, the soft fucker-but there are also some that he'd made with his own two hands. Obviously, his handiwork isn't the *best*, and it had mostly been done in the middle of the night, given that it had basically been his only free time before Phil had been hurt. But it's *his*, something he's made, something undeniably *Tommy* that he can give to the rest of them.

Wilbur shoves his head to the side gently. "Whatever you say," he says, and Tommy flips him off, unable to contain his smile. Wilbur glances over towards Phil's hospital bed, then looks back at Tommy with an unreadable sort of expression. "You know, he's gonna love whatever you got him. He always wakes up late on Christmas anyway."

Tommy looks away, and Tubbo's hand is on his arm in an instant. "I know," he murmurs, and Wilbur pokes him in the chest. "I'm fine, Wil. Just... tired. It's a lot."

"Remember when Mum was on one of her work trips overseas and her flight home for Christmas got canceled?" Wilbur asks, and Tommy nods uneasily, not entirely sure where he's going with this. "Kinda feels like that. I mean, obviously, this is worse, Dad's in a fuckin' *coma*, but-that's not my point. I'm trying to say that... it's just one Christmas. We'll have next year, and the year after that, and a ton after *that*."

"At least me and him are even in terms of number of Christmases missed," Kristin chimes in, and Tommy snorts. Her eyes turn downcast, and she sighs. "It's hard. I'm not gonna pretend like it isn't, and I don't want any of you to feel like you have to, either. But I do wanna make today as good for all of us as I possibly can."

Before any of them can respond, Puffy bursts into the room, somehow balancing about four trays of what looks like home-cooked meals, Techno and Foolish trailing behind her with coolers and trays full of sweets and pastries. "Woo! Told you we could do it in one trip!" she says, beaming, though her smile dims when she looks at the rest of them. "What did we miss?"

"Let me help you with some of that," Sally says, taking two of the

trays and starting to set it out as Techno lines the coolers up and Foolish offers some sweets to Tommy and Tubbo. Tubbo takes a few from the tray, but Tommy politely declines. He doesn't think he can stomach anything sweet right now.

He moves to stand beside Kristin and help her lay out some of the little decorations she's brought with her. "Thanks for holding us all together," he mumbles. "This is probably just as hard for you as it is for us, I... I didn't even *think* of it like that."

"That's because the way *I'm* dealing with all of this isn't something for you to worry about. I don't want you to, you're my kid, and you're still just that, a *kid*. I have people to confide in, people to talk to or vent to for support, but *you* shouldn't be that person, nor should you feel like you have to be," she tells him, a hand on his shoulder. "You've got just as much to process as me, and knowing you, you'd probably prioritize my feelings above your own. That's not something I want for you."

Tommy smiles gently. "Yeah, that sounds like me," he agrees, and she smiles too as she starts to string baubles from the lights Sam had strung up around the room ages ago. "Here, lemme do those, I'm tall enough to reach without a step-stool."

Kristin glares playfully at him, but she hands the baubles over anyway. Tommy makes his way around the room as he strings them around haphazardly. He doesn't want them to look too uniform; the hospital room itself already always feels too neat, too sterile, too organized. There's idle chatter from everyone else. It seems as though Sally and Techno are getting along swimmingly, much to Wilbur's dismay. They're probably embarrassing him as much as they can. Tommy smiles to himself at that. Puffy and Kristin are talking about something over by the food, and Foolish is staring down at his phone cluelessly as Tubbo clearly attempts to walk him through whatever it is he's trying to figure out.

The atmosphere is nice.

It's warm.

Tommy finishes up with the last of the baubles and moves over to sit

by the pile of presents as Puffy and Sally start to pass around plates of food. Sally winks at him as she hands him one piled high with food—mostly protein—and she moves to sit next to Wilbur. Techno slides into the seat on Tommy's left, and Tubbo takes the one on his right. Puffy settles next to Foolish, and Kristin sits in the very center, smiling brightly.

"Alright, who wants to give out their gifts first?" she asks, and Tommy immediately moves forward, entrusting his plate to Tubbo, who guards it with his life as Tommy starts to pass around his poorly-wrapped gifts. He'd *tried*, but wrapping paper is so fucking difficult to fold properly around shit.

"I want to open mine first," Wilbur says loudly, and he tears open the paper to the guitar care kit that Tommy had picked out at the store, and his eyes go wide. "Holy *shit*, Toms, *thank you!*"

Tommy grins. Puffy goes to open hers next, and she visibly brightens at the sight of a clipboard decorated with little rainbows. "I was keeping that for when you got an office, and the timing kind of lined up," he admits, and Puffy clutches the clipboard to her chest, positively beaming.

"Mine next, mine next," Tubbo insists, handing Tommy's plate back over so that he can open the parcel. Tommy's a little nervous about it, he's not going to lie. Tubbo takes the hand-embroidered jumper out of the wrapping paper and blinks. Tommy can't tell what he's thinking. He hopes it doesn't look as bad as his perfectionism insists it is. He'd stared at Tubbo's little bee pin for *ages* trying to make the embroidered bees on the jumper the exact same. Tubbo looks up at him, finally, eyes rather misty. "Oh fuck off, this is incredible! Did you do this yourself?!"

Tommy nods, and Tubbo immediately jams the jumper on over his head. Tommy laughs, and he turns to Techno, who raises a brow at him. "Open it, you're gonna love it," he says, fully confident, and Techno huffs out an amused laugh as he does, but the laughter is immediately replaced by awe as he opens up his gift. Tommy shrugs. "I know a guy."

The leather cutlass sheath had been difficult as *fuck* to get, but

thankfully, *Spider-Man* had stopped one of Blaze's bombs at a leatherworker's shop. Tommy was able to get it for a reasonable price-the guy had tried to give it to him for free, but Tommy had insisted on paying at least something-and it's engraved with the words: *For The Blade*.

"Tommy, this is... insane," Techno says, voice hushed as he runs his fingers over the pressed letters, and Tommy can't help but grin.

Kristin opens hers next. "Oh, this is *beautiful*," she says, holding up the necklace for everyone else to see. Techno nudges his side and shoots him a thumbs-up, and Wilbur looks positively baffled at the sight of the heart-shaped ruby.

Stopping jewelry store robberies is more common than one might think.

Foolish opens his next, an actual fossilized shark tooth courtesy of a very kind and eccentric old woman whose cat he'd once rescued. "Is this real?" he asks, and Tommy nods proudly. "That's so cool, man!"

Sally opens hers next, another embroidered jumper with little rain clouds in a diagonal pattern. "Because you and Wil were being gross in the rain, and then you got your shit together," Tommy explains, and Sally looks over to Wilbur to share a sickeningly sweet smile.

Seeing as that's the last of Tommy's presents, they move on to Wilbur's; Tommy gets a record player, which is fucking *insane*. Kristin gives him a few vinyls to go with it, and now Tommy knows that they're in *cahoots*. Sentimental assholes. A new pair of trainers from Sally-they're fucking *cool*, too-a pair of headphones from Puffy, and a gift card from Foolish. Tubbo's cover-up gift is a tiny ceramic cow that Tommy promptly decides is named Henry the Second.

Techno's gift to him is a polaroid camera and a photo album.

"You can take as many photos of the two of us as you want," Techno tells him quietly, and Tommy gives him a soft smile. "I'll pose and everything."

“Thanks, Tech.”

“Anytime, kid. Merry Christmas.”

If the Christmas chapter was posted on New Years Eve, no it wasn't <3

Art list (because there's enough to make one, which still blows my mind):

[This art](#) is based off of ch42 and is absolutely heart-wrenching ;-;

[This art](#) showing The Sense going off is super cool!!

[This interpretation of Tommy's suit](#) is also ridiculously awesome :D

[This design of Automata](#) makes me go absolutely feral omg

[This really cool design](#) of Spider-Tommy

[These sketches](#) have super dynamic poses, and the design is so cool!!

[These sketches](#) are cute as hell :D

[This absolutely incredible piece](#) blows my mind every time I look at it

[This sketch of Spider-Innit](#) is so cute, he has little knee pads!!

Another look into The In-Between.

CW: mentions of suicide

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The In-Between is a lonely place.

498 is vaguely aware of the other... presences here, but there's no one to talk to, no one to keep him company. Idly, he wonders if The Keeper is coming back soon. He'd gone so quickly, and usually, he's back within a few minutes-something about timelines shifting or whatever, 498 had never really understood what he'd meant-but he's been gone for ages. There's no real concept of time here, so 498 isn't *entirely* sure of how long he's been gone, but he'd counted past five hundred seconds before he'd lost track, so surely it's been a while.

498 sits on the train platform, legs dangling over the side, and he wonders if a train will actually run through here. It hasn't yet, but there's always the possibility. 498's always quite liked trains; of course, he doesn't entirely remember why. He's fairly certain that it's got something to do with his childhood, but his memories are all... scrambled.

Being in that godforsaken place will do that to you.

They'd tried to get his memory back in order-the people that had said they were his family, his friends-but nothing had been working. 498 had tried, he'd tried *so hard*, but nothing would stick, no matter what he did. 498 wonders if it's even possible to remember anything now that he's here. The In-Between doesn't exactly give off the sense of being a healing sort of atmosphere.

He wonders if it would let him make a trade.

Would The In-Between let him trade the memory of what had happened to him in that place for the memories he's lost? It would be so much *easier* that way. He'd be able to remember his actual name, the one that his family had to keep reminding him of, rather than... well, 498 is more comfortable with the number The Keeper had given him.

It's not that 498 *doesn't* know what he'd been called by his family. It just feels wrong, somehow, to use that name when it feels as though it belongs to someone else, someone far enough removed from himself that it feels like a completely separate identity. Logically, 498 knows that it's *him*, that he *is* who they'd lost and found again, but it still hasn't clicked. He supposes that, given he's dead now, it might never click.

From what little he knows about how The Keeper operates, his timeline is gone now. Obliterated in order to preserve whichever ones *haven't* resulted in 498's death. Or, he supposes, *other* versions of 498's deaths. It's weird to think about. All of these presences, these suffocating presences, they're all... him. Versions of him. 498 wonders how many of them are his age. He wonders how many are younger.

When he'd asked The Keeper, all he'd gotten as an answer had been a sad smile, and The Keeper had told him not to worry about it just yet. That makes sense to 498, all things considered. It's not as if he's going to be able to talk to or interact with any of the other versions, so he should stop wondering about it. Especially if The Keeper doesn't want to be pestered with 498's annoying questions. He doesn't want to make The Keeper angry with him.

Once, The Keeper had entered The In-Between in a panic, hurrying

up to-from what 498 could tell, anyway-seemingly blank spaces, asking questions and only getting more and more frustrated as the time went by. 498 had tried to stay back, to keep to himself; he hadn't wanted to cause The Keeper any trouble, let alone have a celestial being *irritated* by him.

But The Keeper had approached him anyway, hesitant. *"I know you can't remember much, but... do you remember an, um... an accident? I-Involving your dad, I mean,"* he'd said, and 498 had tried *so hard* to remember, because not answering questions, not speaking when spoken to-it had only ever meant punishment in that place, only ever meant bad things.

"I'm sorry, I-I can't remember, I'm trying, I really am," 498 had said, and The Keeper had groaned in frustration. 498 remembers putting his hands up defensively in front of his face on instinct, and The Keeper's face had fallen, all of the irritation and exasperation disappearing in an instant. But, of course, *no* reaction is worse than anger, no reaction had meant that it would only get worse from here, and 498 had stumbled back-a presence had shifted under his weight and he'd shivered. *"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I-I didn't mean to make you mad, I'm sorry, I swear I hadn't meant to flinch, Mr. Keeper, please-!"*

The Keeper had only seemed more sad at that, and he'd pulled 498 into a gentle hug, keeping his movements deliberately slow, for some reason. It had reminded 498 of his *real* brother, the one who'd played the guitar. *"I will never hurt you,"* The Keeper had said. *"You can trust me. I don't know what he's done to you, but it will **never** happen again. Okay?"*

498 had believed him, because what other choice had there been?

In that place, it had never been very productive to argue. If *he* had said something, it had been fact, law, set in stone. If 498 had ever questioned something *he* had said, it had never ended well. 498 still isn't sure whether or not the rules in The In-Between are the same, but he's not about to test the waters. He knows better than that.

In all of his time in that place, of all the hours upon hours upon *days* spent in agony, he had learned some valuable lessons. One is that

no matter how good you've been, no matter how hard you try to make up for whatever you've done wrong, your mistakes are the most important part of you. The second is that talking back-having an attitude-is unacceptable in any circumstance, let alone one in which someone is generous and kind enough to be taking care of you. The third, of course, is that you cannot trust *anything*.

Nothing is real. Everything is fabricated. His 'life story,' his 'family,' in there, it had all been fake, all been manufactured. Every kind word is deliberate, every punishment and insult carefully crafted to cut as deep as possible. When he'd eventually gotten used to it, the consequences for *anything* he'd done had increased tenfold. More pain, more isolation, more fucking *torture*.

498 wonders if The Keeper has found out anything about it. It's not as though 498 has been *open* about any of it. He doesn't respond to questions-which is odd, because nothing ever comes of that, it's almost as if he's *allowed* to leave things unanswered-he hardly *speaks* unless his fear gets the better of him.

He can tell that it's not what he's supposed to be like. Every flinch is met with sad eyes, every stutter with a patient, if resigned, smile. 498 is not supposed to be timid. He knows that, knew it every time his family-his *actual* family-had looked at him with devastation. 498 must have been so incredibly different before. The person he'd been, the boy who'd been brave enough to *fight*, feels so far away now.

They'd told him stories, though. The kid that must have been his best friend before had been particularly passionate about regaling 498 with almost theatrical tales, talks of supervillains and heroism and feats that 498 hadn't known were possible. The man that had called himself 498's father had kept more to childhood stories.

498's mother, his *real* mother, hadn't told many stories, but she'd stayed with him almost every second of every day. Well, until it had gotten too hard for her. 498 doesn't blame her, obviously; it must have been unbearable to watch your son come back to you as someone unrecognizable and never really *come back*.

Then there had been the issue of his... brothers.

To be entirely truthful, 498 shivers at the mere *use* of the word. To find out he'd had *two* before all of that? It had been overwhelming, to say the least. The softer one, the one that had brought his guitar with him sometimes, he could deal with. He had been very nice, very understanding and kept his movements slow. That's the part that 498 had liked the most. The soft brother had been easy to sit with in that room, those quiet walls.

The other one had been more like *him*. Tall and brooding and *angry*. He'd insisted-everyone had insisted-that he hadn't been mad at 498, rather at the circumstances, but 498 had known better. 498 *still* knows better. Any anger, any frustration, any irritation... it paints a target on his back. Every time the other brother had been in the room, 498 had felt like he'd been looking at a stranger. There hadn't been *much* familiarity with the others, sure, but there had been *some*, there had been a feeling of *safety* and *home*, even if 498 hadn't been able to remember *why* those feelings had been there. But with the other brother, that had all been... gone.

He wonders if either of his brothers had seen his body before The Keeper had ended the timeline. For their sakes, he hopes not.

It had taken a long time to die.

498 doesn't like to think about that part.

So here he sits, on the edge of the white void that barely forms the platform. He supposes it won't do him any good to sit here until The Keeper comes to him, so he decides to get up and look around. Stretch his legs. Not that he needs to, considering the whole metaphysical thing, but it makes him feel less... inhuman. 498 hates feeling like that.

Wandering around the eerie station, 498 shivers as he passes some presences. It's odd to think that there's other versions of him here that he just... can't see. He imagines it's difficult for The Keeper to make sure none of them feel lonely. Maybe one of the versions feels just as horrid as 498 feels. There would be no way to know.

"Four hundred and ninety-seven other versions of you, and none of them had lived to eighteen," The Keeper had told him once, long

after he'd told 498 not to worry about the ages of the other presences, eyes filled with something akin to guilt, and 498 had shifted uncomfortably. Even now, the thought of so many children, so many versions of the child he used to be, wandering around in what doesn't quite feel like purgatory... it's unsettling.

There's a presence in the distance, *someone* in the distance, and 498's shoulders slump in relief; at least The Keeper is back now. He doesn't want to interrupt The Keeper if he's with another soul right now, of course, but it would still be nice to be able to say hello, be able to *talk* to someone. 498 has been silent long enough to fill an eternity.

"Mr. Keeper, welcome back," he says, soft enough that he hopes he's not misconstrued as being *too* enthusiastic. Things he's excited about always tend to get taken from him. To his surprise, though, The Keeper is not the person he'd seen from farther away.

Instead, there is a child. Impossibly small and hardly over the age of four, there is a child sitting on the ground, looking rather frightened.

At the sight of 498, the child blinks and tilts his head. "Hi," he says quietly, waving his tiny hand, and 498 feels his heart drop into his stomach. The child pushes himself up from the ground-the void?-and toddles up to 498. To 498's utter surprise, the child sticks his hand up, face scrunched in adorable determination. "My name is Tommy, and I got lost."

"You're... lost?" 498 asks, voice shaky, and the child-Tommy, though it's odd to be calling the kid that when that's technically *his* name as well, legally speaking-nods firmly, waving his hand up and down until 498 reaches down to gently shake it. 498 swallows. "H-How did you get lost?"

"I was in Mummy's car, and it did a flip," he says, "so now I haf'ta find her."

498 lifts a hand to his mouth, trembling. The Keeper still isn't here, and now there's a fucking *toddler* here, convinced that his mum is somewhere around The In-Between. 498 is not equipped to tell a child that he's dead. 498 is not equipped to deal with a child *period*.

Especially when said child goes to grab his index finger with a tiny hand-so tiny, he's so *small*, so fragile-and marches forward.

"D-Did she not tell you about stranger danger?" 498 manages to stutter, and the child pouts up at him. 498 crouches down to be eye-to-eye with the child, and he smiles as best as he can, given the emotional toll of what's happening right now. 498 brushes a bouncy, fluffy curl away from the child's face. He's so *small*. "We should wait for a grown-up, o-okay?"

The child gives him a rather confused look. "But *you're* a grown-up, aren't you?" he asks, and 498 barks out a laugh, shaking his head.

"Far from it. I mean, technically speaking, you'd be right, but-"

"But you look just like my dad! Well, less old," the child says thoughtfully, as though comparing the two in his head, and 498 chokes on his words. There had been a few times when he'd been brave enough to look at photo albums to try to jog his memory. The resemblance had been there, sure, but he definitely doesn't look *just* like his father. Though, to a child, he supposes it doesn't really matter. Tall, blue eyes, long hair like his father had when he'd been younger... that's probably enough for his little mind to make the connection.

498 clears his throat. "Well, um... God, how do I...? Okay, so, you and I are... the same person," he says slowly, and the child blinks up at him. "I'm just... an older version of you, I suppose-"

"You're from the *future?!'*" the child asks in an astonished whisper, and 498 lets out a surprised laugh. Had he *always* been like this? The child bounces up and down in place, clearly excited at the prospect of non-existent time travel, and 498 smiles sadly at him. "That's so cool! Wilby's never gonna believe it!"

Ah.

That's...

498 shifts uncomfortably and glances around. Hopefully, The Keeper will be here soon. But until then, he's going to have to make

sure that this kid stays happy and hopeful. 498 definitely doesn't want to be the one to give him the bad news. "Oh? Tell me all about 'Wilby,'" 498 says, scooping the child up in his arms, and the child positively *glows* with a beaming smile.

"He's the best big brother in the whole wide world!" he cheers, arms in the air, and 498 chuckles lightly. He supposes he should start actively seeking out The Keeper while the child is occupied with talking about his big brother. The child holds his hand up to his chin and hums, brows furrowed. "Well, *Techno's* the best big brother too... they're both the best!"

"Is that so?" 498 asks, trying not to laugh as the child nods eagerly. There's no sign of The Keeper yet, so he keeps walking. "Well, I'm very glad that they're such good big brothers. Are you a good *little* brother?"

"Of course I am!" the child protests, cheeks puffed out and arms crossed as though a suggestion otherwise is just preposterous, and 498 chuckles. The child tugs on 498's shirt-come to think of it, they're both wearing the same set of clothes, an almost pyjama-like set of a white shirt and white trousers-and he frowns at the purple marks on 498's neck. "What happened to your neck? Why's it all ugly?"

498 laughs, nervous. "Don't you wanna know what Wilbur and Techno are like in the future?" he asks, in lieu of having to answer that he had, in fact, killed himself, and the child's question is immediately forgotten. He nods again, eyes wide, and 498 smiles. "Well, Wilbur plays the guitar, he's really good at it. And Techno... he's very strong."

The child pouts. "Aw," he whines, and 498 tilts his head curiously, still keeping a wary eye out for The Keeper. The child glares up at him. "Does that mean Mummy was right when she said vegetables make you big and strong? Do I have to eat vegetables now?"

Snorting, 498 laughs. "I mean, I like to think I'm pretty strong, and I haven't eaten all that many vegetables lately," he says, leaving out the part about the whole... being dead thing. It seems to be a satisfying answer nonetheless, though. Thankfully, as 498 moves

forward a bit, he can see The Keeper. “Ah! Mr. Keeper! We have a bit of a, um, *situation*.”

The Keeper turns from what seems to 498 like a blank space, and his concern quickly turns to horror at the sight of the child in 498's arms. “No,” he whispers, completely in disbelief, and the child presses closer to 498, like he's only *now* remembering stranger danger. The Keeper looks to 498, the expression on his face the epitome of devastation. “Have you told him?”

498 shakes his head, and he carefully nudges the child into The Keeper's arms. “It's alright, I trust him,” he reassures him, even though that's a lie. The child, still wary, nods. The Keeper smiles warmly at him, though his eyes are a little watery. “This is, um... he's the four hundred and ninety-ninth, right?”

“Yes,” The Keeper says, and the child's brows furrow.

“No, I'm *Tommy*,” he says, pouting. He points to 498. “This is me from the *future*. There's just the two of us. I can't find Mummy.”

The Keeper's face falls. “Oh, I don't... I...” he trails off, and he looks to 498. “Four-ninety-eight, why don't you... take a walk. This might be a while.”

“Right. Of course,” 498 says, and he reaches out to grasp the child's hand, giving it a very gentle squeeze. “I'll be back soon.”

He turns to walk away. It doesn't take very long to hear helpless cries in the distance and hurried reassurances.

498 isn't sure how long it's been, but it's been long enough that 499 doesn't seem all too broken up about being dead anymore.

Odd to be saying that about a child, but it's true nonetheless. 499 had shaken the shock off rather quickly, toddling after 498 and insisting that they were ‘basically brothers’ now. Which is why he's refusing to be called Tommy. “*I want a number! Like yours!*” he'd insisted. 498 isn't really sure that 499 is aware of how awful their numbers truly are, but in an odd way, having someone else prefer a

number over 'Tommy' or... that name... is comforting.

Now, 498 spends his... days? Weeks? Months? He spends them with 499, playing games and teaching him things and telling him about what little bits and pieces of their family he can manage to remember. *"I have a hard time remembering things,"* he'd explained. *"Something horrible happened to me, and it really messed me up."*

"It's okay! We can clean the mess up together," 499 had said, cheerful as always, and 498 had felt... something. Not a good thing, not a bad thing, but *something*. Something important. A thing that no one in his time in the living plane had made him feel. 499 had frowned as 498 had started crying, holding 498's face in his tiny little hands. *"Don't cry! It's just a mess! Wilby and Techno help me clean up messes all the time, and now that we're brothers, I can help you clean up yours, okay?"*

On some level, 498 feels jealous. It's an awful feeling, he knows, but he can't help it. Because what could he even say to a four year old version of himself that's never known and is never *going* to know the hardships he's been through? How does he reconcile with the feeling that it's *unfair* that 499 had the *privilege* of dying before such a horrible, traumatic experience? How does he deal with the guilt that comes with that line of thinking, the guilt that comes with being *envious* of a child's death? 498 and 499 are the embodiment of wasted potential. 499's life was snuffed out cruelly, and 498 had snuffed out his own with no remorse. 499 is everything 498 could have been, and everything 498 had turned into.

You could have been happy, and I could have been you.

Of course, 498 can't be lost in his own thoughts for very long anymore, not with 499's constant energy. It would probably be a little tiring if 498 weren't physically incapable of getting tired. So it's no surprise when 499 asks 498 to do something with him, but 498 hadn't been expecting the kid to ask to be taught how to write.

"Well, I don't know if we *can*, it's not as if we have paper here," 498 tells him, and 499 pouts. "I thought you knew how to write, though, don't they... don't they teach you that in school? Were you old enough to go to school? I don't know how kids work."

499 huffs. "Techno taught me *some* letters, but I need *help*," he whines, and 498 gives him an amused look. 499's cheeks flush red, and he looks away. 498 realizes, with some amusement, that he's *embarrassed*. "I wanna make you something, but I dunno how to *write*."

498 blinks in surprise. He waves over The Keeper, who still looks down at 499 with that sad sort of smile on his face every time he sees him. 498 shifts back and forth. "Um, can we have, like, some paper or something? I-I'ts okay if you can't, I-I just figured it couldn't hurt to *ask*, I don't know if you can even *get* paper here, obviously, and you might not be able to, I-!" 498 cuts himself off, shoulders hunched up by his ears. "What I *mean* to say i-is, um... I don't mean to be a bother, really, i-if it's inconvenient for you, you don't have to, of course, I-I wouldn't want you to go out of your way or-"

"Four-ninety-eight is gonna teach me how to write!" 499 interrupts, and The Keeper looks very frazzled at both the rambling and the interjection. 498 subtly steps in front of 499, just in case, *just in case, if The Keeper is mad, he can't take it out on the kid, you can't let him take it out on the kid if he gets mad, 499 hasn't done anything wrong*- "I can't see, Eight!"

"Ah! Sorry," 498 mumbles, stepping to the side a bit. 499's hands still cling to the back of his leg, and he smiles shakily. The Keeper is watching the two of them interact with an unreadable sort of expression. 498 swallows. "C-Could we... have some paper, then?"

The Keeper frowns, but it's thoughtful rather than irate. "I guess I could try, but I've never really... conjured anything here before. Physical objects usually aren't allowed to be summoned on the metaphysical plane. I just don't want you guys to be disappointed," he says, and 499 beams. 498's hands are still shaking. The Keeper closes his eyes, holding his hands up and out in front of him. 498 blinks, and suddenly, there's a ream of paper and a pack of pencils in The Keeper's hands. The Keeper seems just as surprised as him. "Oh! Well, that worked. Here you go."

He hands the paper and pencils to 498 and gives 499 a little wave before hurrying off to another corner of The In-Between, presumably to handle a different Tommy's requests. 498 sits down on the

ground-the void? The floor? He still isn't sure what to call it-next to 499 and hands him one of the pencils, carefully moving 499's tiny fingers around it so that he's holding it properly.

"Sorry I got in the way," 498 murmurs, and 499 pats his knee with a gentle, small, *so small* hand.

"It's okay. I know you get scared," 499 tells him. "But Mr. Keeper is nice. We can trust him. Now *please* tell me how to write your number? The four and nine and eight? Please?"

498 smiles. "Here, try to follow how I write it," he says, taking a pencil for himself and steadying his hand as best as he can. He writes down a slightly shaky four, and 499 sticks his tongue out in concentration, carefully copying the lines. "Sorry it's so messy."

"Don't worry, my hands get shaky too sometimes," 499 says easily. "It happens when I think about the car too much."

Well that's... heartbreaking.

Taking a deep breath, 498 writes a nine next to the four, and 499 tries to copy it, making a face when it comes out all wonky. He starts to crumple up the paper, but 498 stops him, smoothing the paper out. "It's okay, it's hard to learn at first, but you can't give up after one bad try," he says, and 499 pouts. "I'll do a bad one too so that we're even, see?"

He makes the worst nine he can. 499 giggles. "It's really ugly," he says, and 498 grins. Good. As long as 499 is happy, as long as he's smiling, that's all that matters. Maybe one day, he'll tell 499 about what had really happened to him, but for now... for now, the only important thing is to keep 499 innocent and cheerful.

Which is going to be hard to do, considering there's a new presence in The In-Between.

It's just a figure on the horizon from where 498 and 499 are sitting, sure, but judging by the fact that both he *and* 499 shiver as a rush of other presences moves towards the person on the horizon, it's someone important to *every* version of Tommy. 498 scoops up 499

and starts to walk carefully towards the figure.

"I've got you," 498 whispers as 499's tiny fingers twist in the fabric of his shirt. "I won't let anything happen to you, I swear it."

499 nods and clings to him even tighter as they pass what feels like a *cloud* of hazy presences, both of them freezing up at the sight of who the person in question is.

It's not a Tommy.

It's not 500.

It's their father.

"Dadza," 499 says, and he's struggling to get out of 498's arms now. "Lemme go! I want my Dadza!"

498's hold loosens-he's still in shock-and 499 stumbles down, catching himself and making a mad dash for his father. His little hands phase through the long white robes as he tries to make a grab at him, eyes quickly filling with tears. It's almost as if he can't see 499.

Horribly, 498 realizes that *is* the case.

"Come on, come here, it's okay," 498 whispers as 499 starts to snuffle and sob, trying *so hard* to make Phil notice him. He leans into 498's arms and cries out, and 498 gently runs a hand through 499's hair, holding him close. "I've got you, I've got you... I'm so sorry, Nines, I-I thought he'd be able to see you, I..."

499 just sobs harder, one arm still reaching out for Phil. The Keeper rushes over, blinking in surprise at the source of the commotion. "Phil? What are you doing here?" he asks, bewildered, and Phil looks just as confused.

"I'm not entirely sure myself, mate," Phil says, an unsure smile on his face. 498 wonders why Phil can't see them. It feels unfair. Phil looks around. The other Tommys must be just as upset, especially the younger ones. 498 doesn't feel much at all. "Am I... supposed to be here?"

"No," The Keeper says, "no, you're not. You have to go back. You have to wake up."

Wake up? What does that mean?

They don't get an answer, seeing as The Keeper touches a hand to Phil's chest, and he's gone in an instant.

499's wails are barely muffled by 498's shirt.

498 is crying. He doesn't know why.

I blinked and y'all got this fic to 2k kudos??? Hello????

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter!!

Art list:

[This art](#) is based off of ch42 and is absolutely heart-wrenching ;-;

[This art](#) showing The Sense going off is super cool!!

[This interpretation of Tommy's suit](#) is also ridiculously awesome :D

[This design of Automata](#) makes me go absolutely feral omg

[This really cool design](#) of Spider-Tommy

[These sketches](#) have super dynamic poses, and the design is so cool!!

[These sketches](#) are cute as hell :D

[This absolutely incredible piece](#) blows my mind every time I look at it

[This sketch of Spider-Innit](#) is so cute, he has little knee pads!!

[This](#) absolutely phenomenal design of Spider-Innit, it lives in my brain rent-free, go check it out!!

good morning

Chapter 51: good morning

Phil wakes up.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Phil has been awake for two and a half hours now.

The doctors have been in and out, checking up on his vitals and doing bloodwork and making sure that he's going to *stay* awake and not... y'know. Die. This also means that everyone has been ushered out-no visitors until the doctors are one hundred percent sure he's stable. Well, Phil *feels* stable, he feels relatively fine, if not a little groggy. Granted, he's just woken up from a month-long coma, so it makes sense.

One of the doctors had told him he'd died, medically speaking, for two minutes. While that's horrifying to learn, it's almost a relief to know that it had been while his family had been out of the room to get food; the nurse changing his IV had called the doctors in immediately, and they'd been able to revive him. Phil doesn't really remember much, given that he'd been dead, but he *had* remembered hearing crying. Lots of it.

He doesn't entirely *want* to remember.

What he *does* remember, though, is that before he'd gone unconscious, he'd been bleeding out in Spider-Man's arms.

In *Tommy's* arms.

That still throws his mind for a loop. Phil honestly can't believe that

Spider-Man is Tommy. That Tommy is Spider-Man. It just feels... impossible. Because if Tommy *were* a superhero, if he's been spending afternoons and evenings fighting incredibly powerful and malicious villains, then Phil should've *known* about it.

How well does he even know his own son? Surely, he should've noticed that something's been off, something's been different, but he hasn't. There's been no signs-hell, maybe there has, but even the gift of hindsight still leaves Phil uncertain-and it's not as though anyone else knows, because *surely* they would have told him by now. Unless Tommy had somehow managed to charm his way into keeping them quiet. Phil wouldn't put it past him, nor would he underestimate the power of Tommy's pestering. Shit.

Obviously, there'd been the falling grades towards the beginning of the school year, but Tommy had fixed those, he'd gotten those back in order. There'd been that one time where Tommy had hidden an injury, but Phil had chalked that up to a one-off incident, maybe a dickhead kid at school or something who'd left Tommy alone after that. Tommy would have told Phil if there had been an ongoing situation, Phil *knows* that.

But does he?

If he hadn't known about the whole Spider-Man situation, what else is he missing? What else has Tommy not told him? Well, that's not entirely fair of Phil to say; teenagers are bound to keep things to themselves, bound to keep secrets, even if there's nothing but trust and understanding built with their parents. Tommy's exploring his independence, just... not in the way that Phil had been expecting. Most teenagers just go to parties and drink or try out recreational drugs or hang out with kids that definitely aren't good influences. Most teenagers don't spend their days fighting crime as an undercover vigilante.

Maybe he shouldn't be thinking like this, but Phil feels... proud. More than anything-save for his worry-he is so *proud* of Tommy. Obviously, he trusts his kids to do the right thing, but it's incredible to think that as soon as Tommy had somehow gotten himself superpowers, he'd jumped to fighting crime and doing things for the greater good.

Tommy's a good kid. Phil knows that, of course he does. It's just odd to think back to big fights between Spider-Man and a villain or criminal and picture *Tommy* rather than someone without a face, without a name. Perhaps odd isn't the right word for it. Horrifying? That's accurate. Astonishing? That works too.

Phil might have mixed feelings about Tommy being Spider-Man, but he's not about to stop him from continuing. Tommy's stubborn as all hell to begin with, and now that Phil knows his secret identity, there's nothing stopping Tommy from using his powers to leave the house and do what he wants. Phil also knows that without Tommy, there'd be no one to stop those fuckers that make a hobby out of levelling city blocks.

Could *Tommy* level a city block? Exactly how powerful *is* his son? He's seen Spider-Man lifting fucking cars like they weigh nothing, and he's seen Tommy struggle to open a brand new bottle of ketchup. Phil's not out of the loop or anything-well, other than the month he's missed because of his coma-so he's vaguely aware of Spider-Man's other powers.

Regeneration would explain why Tommy's never *seemed* injured. It would also explain his insanely fast metabolism, which is probably why Phil's been buying nothing but meat for the past couple of months. Oh, and Tommy's newfound hatred for sweet things! God, everything really *does* make sense now.

Phil's barely been able to get through raising two semi-normal kids. Wilbur is, well, Wilbur, and he'd been on a fast-track to graduate. Far too brilliant for his own good, witty and charming, it had been a non-stop loop of finding out bizarre shit he'd gotten into and learning that he'd managed to talk his way out of getting in trouble for it. Techno, while much less inclined to outward chaos, had been absolutely *ruthless* in every sport they'd put him in, to the point where it had almost been a problem. At least with fencing and sword collecting, Techno had found his groove. Not to *mention* how hard it had been to get their hands on swords for birthdays and Christmases.

Even *without* superpowers, Tommy had grown up being the world's most chaotic child. Him and Tubbo had been an unstoppable duo

when they were little-hell, they *still* are-and most days, Phil had clocked in about ten thousand steps just from chasing those little shits around to try and keep them out of trouble. He had mostly been unsuccessful.

Evidently, he's *still* unsuccessful, because Tommy's gone and made himself a crime-fighting vigilante in his free time. And now, Phil's got to deal with a *superpowered* teenager. Are his rebellious streaks going to be easy to deal with? Phil had thought that the aftermath of that party had been bad, but there's no *telling* what could come in the future. God, he really hopes not much has changed.

There *is* the issue of the immense amount of trauma being Spider-Man and fighting supervillains must've caused him, though.

Oh *fuck*.

Phil slumps back into the pillows and groans, rubbing a hand over his face. The nurse in charge of rearranging his IV gives him a slightly annoyed look, and Phil grins sheepishly. "Sorry, just... got a lot on my mind," he tells her, and she nods. Phil looks towards the door. "Any idea when they'll let my family visit me?"

"It'll only be a bit," she answers. "Just have to finish up here."

Ah, right. He should keep still so she can do her job.

Phil wonders if he should tell Kristin. Does Kristin already *know*? Does *anyone* know? Has Tommy been suffering in silence for months while none of them have noticed? Surely he couldn't have kept it a secret from *everyone*. Phil's fairly sure that Wilbur doesn't know, given that he's openly expressed disdain for Spider-Man before, and he *never* would have if he'd known it was Tommy he'd been talking about. Techno is a toss-up, honestly.

Kristin surely would have told him had she known. If she *does* know, it must have happened after Phil had been hurt. But should Phil tell her if she doesn't know? Surely he should. He can't keep this from his *wife*. Not when it's their kid's life on the line here. But... if Tommy has a reason for not having told them, for keeping this a secret, Phil should respect that too, shouldn't he? Tommy wouldn't be keeping

his identity a secret for no reason.

There could be any number of things that factor in. Tommy might be worried about them getting hurt on his behalf; if the villains somehow find out who Tommy is, it could put anyone he loves in danger. Phil understands that, really, he does, but that doesn't mean that Tommy has to go through all of this alone. Phil hopes against all odds that *someone* knows, that Tommy's had *someone* to go to for all of this.

Obviously, Tommy's therapist doesn't know, or he would've told Phil and Kristin about it, mandatory reporting and all that. Which means that Tommy isn't processing the Spider-Man side of things in therapy. Well, shit, that opens up an entirely different can of worms. Are there therapists for superheroes? Can Phil even *find* one of those?!

This is stressful.

Phil has no idea what the protocol here is supposed to be. How's he supposed to do this? Should he tell Kristin? Wilbur? Techno? *Puffy*? Puffy's training to be a therapist, surely she'd be great to tell. Then again, it's not exactly his secret to share. It's his son, a matter of his son's *safety*, but... is Phil really going to potentially endanger people that Tommy clearly doesn't want endangered? Phil's seen what these villains can do, *Tommy's* seen what they can do, up close and personal, and while Phil is really tempted to just tell Kristin and tackle it from there, the least he can do is talk to Tommy about it first, if only to understand his reasoning.

Phil's also fairly certain that he was never meant to find out about it. Tommy had only taken the mask off when he'd thought Phil was *dying*. Well, now that Phil's decidedly *not* dead, that probably throws a wrench in the whole secret identity thing. In an ideal world, sure, he'd happily let Tommy go out and do whatever he wishes with his superpowers, but...

This *isn't* an ideal world. This world has maniacs with guns and drones and *bombs*, and holy *shit*, Phil really needs to stop replaying every Spider-Man fight in his head.

The nurse gives his vitals a once-over and nods, seemingly

satisfied. Phil just wants to see everyone. It's odd to think he's been unconscious for a *month*. He's hungry as hell-the doctors had said to work his way up from soups and liquids, which feels like bullshit-and he's weirdly tired, so he just wants to see some familiar faces.

Thankfully, the nurse goes to the door and lets in Wilbur and Kristin, who rush to his side, both of them already misty-eyed, and the nurse leaves them, allowing them privacy, which Phil really appreciates. Phil can't help but smile, lifting a hand up to cup Kristin's cheek, and she grins in spite of the tears spilling down her face. "Hey, love," he murmurs, voice still hoarse from disuse, "fancy meeting you here."

"You have no *idea* how much I've missed you," she whispers, placing her hand over his, and Phil beams, turning to Wilbur.

"C'mere, mate," he says, and Wilbur launches forward to give him a surprisingly gentle hug, which leaves the three of them in a weird tangle. Wilbur sobs into his shoulder, and Phil uses his free hand to squeeze his arm. "Where've Techno and Tommy gone off to?"

Wilbur pulls away, sniffing, and Kristin gives Phil a worried look. "Tommy started having a panic attack, so Techno said he'd stay with him until he was ready," she tells him, voice soft, and Phil nods, brows furrowed. He's pretty sure he knows why Tommy had reacted like that, but Kristin doesn't seem to know. So she definitely doesn't have a clue about the Spider-Man thing, then. She presses a kiss to his nose. "God, I'm so glad you're alive..."

"I'm right here," Phil whispers, a gentle reassurance. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Dad, when... when they told us you flatlined, we..." Wilbur trails off, voice trembling, and Phil grabs his hand. Wilbur just keeps looking at him, really looking, like he's never going to get the chance to again-hell, he'd probably thought that was the case-and Phil starts to tear up too. Wilbur smiles, shaky. "I'm just so fucking glad you're alive."

"Can't get rid of me that easily," Phil teases, and the back of his throat starts to feel a bit scratchy. He coughs and points towards the bottles of water the nurses had set aside for him, and Kristin hurries

to get one for him. Phil takes a few sips, then clears his throat. "Thanks. It's a little hard to talk right now."

"I mean, considering you haven't talked in a month, that's understandable," Kristin says, settling down in the chair beside the hospital bed, and Phil reaches over to tuck her hair behind her ear. She takes his hand and presses her lips to his knuckles. "We were so *scared* for you. Thanks for coming back to us."

"Sorry it took me so long," Phil says, and Wilbur shakes his head fondly, as if to tell him there's no need to apologize. "So... what have I missed?"

"Well, Schlatt got elected," Kristin says, "which is... not great. Techno's passed all his finals with flying colors, Puffy got licensed at long last, Wilbur and Sally are doing great-"

"*Mum!*" Wilbur hisses, cheeks red.

Phil grins. "Have you proposed yet, then?" he asks, waggling his eyebrows, and Wilbur buries his face in his hands. Phil chuckles. The door opens again, and Phil looks up to see Techno gently nudging Tommy forward. Tommy seems hesitant-terrified, once he locks eyes with Phil-and he ducks behind Techno, frantically whispering something. "Good morning, you two."

Techno grins. "It's two in the afternoon, old man, I think you're finally going senile," he says, voice thick, and Phil laughs, then coughs. Before anyone can fret *too* much, though, he has some more water. Techno moves forward, taking Phil's free hand-because Kristin and Wil have firmly attached themselves to his other arm-and smiling, more gently this time. "We really missed you."

"He's *Philza*, he never dies," Wilbur says firmly. "He's not allowed to."

"Agreed," Kristin says, nodding. She points a finger at him, and Phil *would* put his hands up in surrender, but they're both taken. "Hear that? Not allowed."

Phil chuckles. He looks over to Tommy, and his smile fades. Tommy

is white as a ghost, eyes wide and hands trembling by his sides. There's a far-away look in his eyes, like he's not *here*, not mentally, at least. Wilbur and Kristin seem to be too absorbed in Phil being awake to notice, not that he's blaming them. But Techno seems to follow his line of sight, and he's up and by Tommy's side in an instant.

"Hey, hey, it's okay, you're *here*, you're safe," Techno tells him, but Tommy doesn't seem to be snapping out of... whatever state of mind he's in right now. "Dad's okay, look, he's awake, see? I promise, Toms, it's fine, it's okay."

Phil's heart aches. He gives Tommy a small, albeit sad smile. "I'm okay, Tommy," he says, and Tommy blinks rapidly. Phil doesn't entirely understand what's going on, but he has the sneaking suspicion it has to do with what had happened the last time Tommy had seen him awake. Phil turns to Kristin and Wilbur, giving each of their hands a light squeeze. "I know this is probably a lot to ask-you haven't been here for very long, after all, but-could you give us a moment?"

Wilbur's brows furrow, and he looks over at Tommy, eyes immediately going wide. So he doesn't know either. "Tommy? Are you alright?" Wilbur asks, and Tommy doesn't respond. Techno keeps whispering things like *you're here, you're safe*, and Tommy barely reacts. Kristin puts a hand on Wilbur's arm and looks back towards Phil.

"He's been struggling," she says quietly, "he only started going back to therapy last week. We'll go get you some soup, give the both of you some time."

She puts her hand up to his face again, thumb gently stroking over his cheek, and Phil leans into the touch, a silent thanks. Kristin gently ushers Wilbur out-Techno takes much more convincing, which is odd-and Phil gestures for Tommy to come sit by him. Tommy just stays where he is, seemingly frozen.

"Toms, we're not back there. I'm *here*, I'm alive, I'm *awake*," Phil says, and Tommy's bottom lip starts to tremble. Phil moves the bedsheets down a bit and points towards his side. "See? Not

impaired anymore. I'm okay, I-"

"I'm sorry," Tommy whispers, looking haunted, and Phil's words die on his tongue. Those two words apparently break down whatever dam had been holding back the flood of grief that visibly wracks through Tommy's body, and Phil watches in muted shock and horror as Tommy buckles, grabbing the edge of the hospital bed for support as his sobs come in gasps. Phil can't exactly get up to help him. Tommy's fingers twist in the sheets, and his chest heaves, his entire body trembling as he cries out.

Phil finally snaps out of his shock. "Tommy, no, it's not-you've nothing to be sor-"

"I'm so sorry! This is all my *fault*, I'm sorry, I-I can't-! I'm sorry, Dad, I'm so-! You're here because of *me*, I should've done more, I should've been faster! I-I just sat there, I was *useless*, I wasn't *good* enough, I couldn't save you *fast* enough, I-I-I can't *breathe-!*" Tommy chokes, and Phil pushes himself up enough that he can sit up, and Tommy looks up at him, eyes wild and terrified. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm *so* sorry, I-I'll never *stop* being sorry! I lied to you, a-and I shouldn't have, I should've told you from the start, I just didn't want to endanger you, b-but I did anyway and I'm *sorry-! Hrp!*"

Tommy gags, then rushes over to the bin in the corner and heaves, and Phil winces. Tommy's shoulders shake as he retches, and Phil really wishes he could get up. He wants to comfort Tommy, to tell him that there's no reason to apologize, because it *isn't* his fault. Tommy whispers something to himself, over and over. Phil wonders what it is, but he's not about to fucking *ask*, not when Tommy is so clearly fragile.

God, Tommy would hate it if he knew that's what Phil's thinking. But it's the truth, isn't it? His kid is fragile right now, and Phil doesn't know what to do about it. He can't get up and comfort him, which leaves him feeling a little helpless. Phil winces as Tommy retches again. Poor Tommy. His grief response is vomiting, apparently-that's gotta *suck*. As Tommy gingerly sits up, still shaking and somehow *more* pale, Phil strains to reach the bottles of water, and he offers one up.

"Your throat's gonna burn for ages if you don't have some water, mate," he says, and Tommy squints, clearly confused. Phil shakes the bottle of water in his direction. "C'mon, then, sit and talk with me, yeah?"

Hesitantly, Tommy stands, hands still shaking at his sides, and he comes to sit next to Phil as he gingerly takes the bottle of water. A couple of minutes pass by as they sit without speaking, Tommy silently calming himself down enough that his breathing isn't rapid and his hands aren't as shaky. "Sorry about, uh... having a bit of an *episode* there," Tommy mutters, voice cracking, and Phil's brow furrows. The plastic of the bottle crunches. "I'm... I really *am* sorry, I-I know I should've done more, I..."

"Tommy. Look at me," Phil tells him, and Tommy slouches down, shoulders nearing his ears as he looks up at Phil. Phil puts a hand on Tommy's shoulder. "You have *nothing* to be sorry for."

Tommy's eyes fill with tears, and he looks away again, bottom lip trembling. "I *do*, though," he whispers. "It's my fault you're here, Dad, I-"

"We'll be having none of that, got it? No blaming yourself. It's not your fault. You did the best you could, and I wouldn't have *lived* if it weren't for you," Phil tells him fiercely. Well, as fiercely as he can, considering his voice is still fairly out of commission. Tommy still avoids his gaze, and Phil sighs. "Mate, it wasn't your fault. I'm *okay*. You're here with me. We're both alive and-well, I've been told I'm gonna have to use a cane for a while, so I'll probably have to deal with even *more* old jokes, but-you have *nothing to be sorry for*. I'll keep telling you that until you believe it, because it's *true*. You're not the bad guy. You've never *been* the bad guy."

"Our new mayor thinks otherwise," Tommy jokes weakly, and he *still* won't look at Phil. Phil frowns. Tommy's shoulders slump. "I let this happen to you, Dad, I-how are you just *okay* with that? I don't-I *can't* understand it, I... I'm *Spider-Man*, for fuck's sake, aren't you *mad* at me?!"

Phil doesn't really know how to respond to that. On one hand, of *course* he's not mad at Tommy, not for this, not for what the fight

with Automata had resulted in, not for *anything*. But on the other, he's pissed to hell and back that Tommy's in danger. He's enraged at the fact no one is *helping* him, not in a way that makes him actively safer. Phil is infuriated at the city, at their apparent *mayor*, at the cops who've brushed Tommy's great deals of help off as bullshit.

Instead of voicing this-he doesn't want to overwhelm Tommy even more than he already is-Phil just smiles gently. "Of course I'm not. I'm *proud* of you," Phil tells him. Tommy looks at him then, finally, and Phil chuckles. "I mean, I'm obviously really fucking worried as well, but... I'm not mad at you. Not for keeping your identity a secret. 'Course, I'd like to know *why*."

Tommy lets out a laugh that sounds both manic and relieved, and Phil takes a sip of water. God, talking this much is *really* starting to hurt. "It's kinda obvious, innit? If one of those fuckers finds out who I am..." he says, trailing off as he looks down at Phil's hand, the one with the IV sticking out of it. Tommy shudders. "I don't even want to *think* about it."

"Does Kristin know?" Phil asks, and Tommy shakes his head, a bit sheepish. Phil sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "Alright, well, you know I have to tell her, right?"

Tommy practically wilts. "You *can't*, I-I can't do that to her, Dad," he protests, voice weak but resolve strong, and Phil really doesn't know what the fuck to do here. Tommy takes Phil's hand in both of his own. He's still shaking. Phil feels his heart break a little more. "Please, not her too, not Mum too, I-you *can't*, please-!"

"Okay," Phil agrees quickly, because Tommy's breathing is picking up again, and Phil thinks that maybe *he's* the one they should have hooked up to the heart monitor, "I won't."

The relief is palpable. Tommy gives Phil's hand a light squeeze. "Thanks. Thank you. I-I'm sorry, I keep panicking and this should be *happy*, this should be, like, a great fuckin' moment, and I'm just *ruining it*," he mutters, pulling away to scrub his hands over his eyes.

"Hey, you're not ruining *anything*, okay? You're traumatized, Toms,"

Phil tells him. "Hell, I might be too. Physically speaking, that's a definite, but I probably didn't come away from almost dying without being a little fucked up."

There's a knock on the door before anything else can be said, and Tommy looks to Phil, like he's asking if it's fine to answer, and Phil nods towards it. Tommy heads over and whoever it is immediately pulls him into a hug. To Phil's utter surprise, it's Techno that follows Tommy back in. "I'm really glad you're okay. Had us worried and all that, y'know," Techno says, and Phil smiles gently. Techno perks up, then reaches into a bag-probably his-and hands Tommy a small parcel. "I can't believe I forgot to give *Spider-Man* his Christmas present."

Phil's mind bluescreens for a moment.

Tommy just laughs quietly and starts to tear the paper, only to pause at whatever expression has made its way onto Phil's face. Techno's brows furrow at Tommy's hesitation, and he looks to Phil, confused. Phil blinks. "You... you knew?" he asks, deadly quiet, and Techno immediately turns to Tommy, eyes wide.

"*You didn't tell him I knew?!*" Techno hisses, and Tommy just groans, tilting his head up to the ceiling as if this is an inconvenience for *him*. Techno lets out a long sigh. "Just-we can talk about this in a minute, just open your gift."

Tommy grins at that, and he takes the lid off of the box, raising his brows in what Phil assumes is skepticism. "Uh, thank you? I think? I have *no* idea what these are," Tommy says, taking out two... okay, Phil has no fucking clue either, but they look like bracelets with a little metal *thing* attached to either side of them.

Techno rolls his eyes, and he puts the bracelets on either of Tommy's hands. "Now tap your wrists together," he instructs, and Tommy does, both him and Phil jumping at the *schwing* sound of metal sliding against metal. There are blades on the outsides of Tommy's hands now, and Techno beams proudly, much to Phil's horror. "They're like the barbs on a spider's feet. Now you can do *extra* damage if those weirdos are tryin' to hurt you."

Tommy inspects the 'barbs' in awe, turning his hands this way and that, and Phil clears his throat, absolutely bewildered. "Techno! What the fuck are you doing?!" he demands, and Techno and Tommy blink at him, eerily in sync. Phil huffs, frustrated. "Tommy, you do *not* need to be stabbing-well, scratch that, I think they deserve much worse, but-Techno, don't encourage him to *stab* them-or maybe you should...? Fuck, how does this usually go?"

Exchanging a look that clearly means *something*, Techno and Tommy both smile. "Welcome to the Spider-Squad, old man," Techno tells him. "There's nothing usual about it."

"Yep! We usually just wing it," Tommy says, and he starts posing with the new blades, karate-chopping the air until Techno absentmindedly nudges his hands down. Tommy's grin dims a little, becomes more of a sad sort of smile, and he looks up at Phil, eyes watery. "I'm, uh... sorry about how you found out."

"Not your fault," Phil reminds him, "never was, never has been, never will be."

"That's what I keep tellin' him, but he's a real bad listener, Phil, just the worst," Techno says, and Tommy waves his hand threateningly in Techno's direction. Techno does not seem phased by this in the least. Instead, his brows furrow. "He told you Tubbo's in on it too, right?"

Phil puts his head in his hands. "I think *this* is gonna be the thing to kill me," he jokes, but it doesn't land well. Phil winces, but he knows if he apologizes, Tommy's just going to internalize the fact that he'd *said* it. "Oh, so Tommy's the only one allowed to make trauma jokes?"

Tommy lets out a surprised laugh, and Techno gives Phil a slight nod of approval. This is quite possibly the weirdest fucking situation he's ever been in, but Phil's glad he knows now. Idly, he wonders if continuing to live in blissful ignorance would be better, but he immediately scolds himself for even thinking such a thing. Now he can help Tommy, can make sure he's getting the medical attention and mental health help that he needs.

"I thought you'd be, like, a lot less cool about this," Tommy says, a little nervously. Phil's brows furrow, and Tommy's leg starts to bounce. "I mean, my biggest worry was how I was gonna convince you to let me keep going, y'know? Plus, I had a *huge* panic attack after they told us you'd flatlined-granted, they also said they resuscitated you, but I was kinda gone at that point-so my emotions are all over the fuckin' place."

"Ah, *that's* why you keep snapping back and forth," Techno says, like he knows exactly what Tommy means, and Phil gestures out helplessly for an explanation.

"Techno says I'm like a rubber band after I have a really bad attack," Tommy says. "I go back and forth between, like, a bajillion emotions. So if I start sobbing violently or laughing like an absolute lunatic, it's because my brain just shorted out."

Techno nods. "It's terrifying," he says flatly, and Tommy snorts.

Phil sighs. "Alright, well, we can talk more about this later, but put those away before your mother comes back and sees," he says, pointing at the bracelets, and Tommy nods. He taps the sides of his wrists together to retract the blades and carefully takes them off, putting them back in the box. Phil hands him another bottle of water. "Stay hydrated, alright? Please take care of yourself, for my sake if nothing else."

"I should be the one telling *you* that," Tommy huffs, but he sips on the water nonetheless.

There's a beat of silence, then Techno hums. "Did you tell him about the building that got dropped on you?"

"Techno, shut the *fuck* up, I *swear*-"

"Someone dropped a *building* on you?!"

Phil is awake!! At long, long last :D

Art list:

[This art](#) is based off of ch42 and is absolutely heart-wrenching ;-;

[This art](#) showing The Sense going off is super cool!!

[This interpretation of Tommy's suit](#) is also ridiculously awesome :D

[This design of Automata](#) makes me go absolutely feral omg

[This really cool design](#) of Spider-Tommy

[These sketches](#) have super dynamic poses, and the design is so cool!!

[These sketches](#) are cute as hell :D

[This absolutely incredible piece](#) blows my mind every time I look at it

[This sketch of Spider-Innit](#) is so cute, he has little knee pads!!

[This](#) absolutely phenomenal design of Spider-Innit, it lives in my brain rent-free, go check it out!!

[These](#) adorable doodles :D

[This](#) amazing watercolor piece!

[This insanely cool art](#) that looks straight out of a comic book!

[This design](#) for Tommy is awesome :D

[This](#) Spider-Innit design is so good!

[This doodle](#) of Spider-Innit is really cute!! The pose is really dynamic :D

[This absolutely incredible sheet](#) for a Spider-Tommy design, I love the little notes!

change

Chapter 52: change

It's been a few weeks, and it's still hard for everyone to adjust.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Tommy swings into his bedroom, alarmed to find that Phil's already there with an assortment of water, painkillers, first-aid essentials, and a *shitload* of food.

"Well, good afternoon to you too, Philza," he says, tugging his mask off, and Phil gives him an awkward wave. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Phil cringes. "I'm still not used to this, y'know," he says, leaning on his cane as Tommy grabs the water bottle and chugs it. It's been a few weeks-Phil's gotten a lot better, especially with so much physical therapy, but Tommy still frets, as does the rest of their family, and Phil's doctor, so Phil is not to go anywhere without his cane-and Tommy's not used to it either.

It also doesn't help that Phil's not exactly the best at keeping secrets. He'd almost brought up a villain fight in the middle of dinner, he keeps forgetting Tommy's suit is in the wash and lumps together a bunch of miscellaneous laundry with it sometimes, and he's had so many close calls that even The Sense is tired of warning Tommy at this point. It's more of a mundane hum of recognition now rather than a panicked chirp.

Tommy tilts his water bottle toward Phil and nods. "You and me both," he says. As Phil moves forward to start his usual fretting, Tommy swats his hands away. "Fuck off, I'm fine, barely a scratch,

alright? If I were *actually* injured, trust me-you'd know it."

"I know that, but *still*," Phil huffs, and Tommy grabs one of the multiple snacks on his desk and chomps down. God, that's good. Phil sighs. "You feelin' alright, mate? Grades and everything okay? D'you need more food? Want me to grab Techno to make sure you haven't missed an injury? You've done that before, y'know."

"Yes, I *know*, but it was only a *light* stabbing that time, Phil, really, you've got to stop worrying so much. I am *fine*, I swear. Grades are up, head boy duties aren't too much-Tubbo's helping me organize a bake sale, not that we need it with the funding from the city-and while I *would* like more food, I'm not starving," Tommy lists off, and Phil nods, still visibly concerned. "You'll get used to it soon, just try not to have a conniption."

Phil glares at him. "You're not funny," he says, and Tommy knows he must mean the opposite, because Tommy is *hilarious*. He sheds the puffy blue jacket layered atop his usual suit; he's been wearing it for the winter, seeing as it's cold as shit and he *doesn't* need to go into hibernation mode in the middle of a fight. Phil's brows furrow. "D'you want me to turn the heater up? You're not cold still?"

Tommy groans. "Phil! Please! I appreciate the concern, really, I do, and I'm grateful for it, but you are *smothering* me," he grits out, and Phil bristles a bit.

"Yeah, well, it's not as if I find out my son is a vigilante every day, it's a bit of a bitch to get used to," he says, somewhat annoyed, and Tommy rolls his eyes. Phil moves to cross his arms, but Tommy webs his hand to the head of the cane-a crow that Foolish had carved for him-and Phil blinks at him. "Mate. I can stand for a *minute* without the cane."

There's something about that idea that makes Tommy's stomach turn with anxiety. "Yeah, well, that's not what your doctor said," Tommy mutters, starting on more of the snacks, and Phil shuts his eyes. Tommy can tell he's probably mad, but honestly, Tommy could give less of a fuck about that. "You need that cane because of a fight I was handling-"

"Don't start with that, you know it's not true-"

"So *excuse me* for trying to make sure that you're using it and listening to your doctor-"

"Tommy, I know my own limits, how many times do I have to tell you that it's not your-"

"Well, it fucking *is* my fault, actually, so could you not-"

"Fuck's sakes, stop *blaming* yourself, we've had this conversation-"

"And it ends up the same every time so you might as well just agree-"

"I'm not fucking agreeing with you that it's your fault! I *never* would, because it's not-"

"You keep *saying* that, but it *is*-"

"It's *not*, I've told you that over and over, *Techno's* told you that-"

"Oh, fuck off, don't bring Techno into this, he's biased-"

"So are you! You keep saying that it's your fault-"

"Yeah, that's 'cuz it's *my fault*-"

"Tommy, enough. You told me you were gonna talk to your therapist about this-"

"That was a lie! I'm not fucking telling him my secret identity! And besides, I already deluded myself into thinking that it was all Automata's doing *once*, I'm not doing it again-"

"It *was* Automata's fault! You're not the one who wrecked the building, Tommy! You didn't drive a metal *pipe* through my stomach, so stop acting like it!" Phil snaps, and Tommy's protests die in his throat. Phil winces. "I'm sorry, I didn't... I just don't know how to..."

As Phil trails off, Tommy shakes his head. "No, no, you're right," Tommy says. "It's not about me, it wasn't-I'm not the one to blame, I

just can't *not* blame myself for it, you know? I don't think I'll ever stop feeling guilty for it, Dad."

Nodding solemnly, Phil looks away. "I get it. I do, I don't mean to... I *never* want to invalidate how you feel, I'm just-it *sucks* to watch you beat yourself up over it," he says. "I'm sorry, Toms, I-is there anything you need?"

"I'm... I'm fine. Thanks, though," Tommy says, and Phil smiles sadly. "I *do* appreciate the worry, honestly, I just... I've gotten used to it. This isn't out of the ordinary for me, and I get that it's, like, fucking *crazy* to you, but when I tell you I'm alright, I need you to *believe me*, man."

"I know, I know," Phil sighs, rubbing his temples. "You have to understand where I'm coming from, though, Tommy, I-you don't want to tell your therapist, you don't want me to tell *Kristin*, and I'm already shit at keeping it a secret! I have to watch you get hurt, knowing there's nothing I can do about it, and it's not as if I want to stop you! You're doing good things, you're doing the *right* thing, and more than anything, I want you to *keep* doing the right thing, it's just... it's an *adjustment*, okay? It's easier for Techno to get used to it, for Tubbo to get used to it, because neither of them have to be your *parent*."

Tommy's shoulders sag a little. Admittedly, he hadn't really thought about it like that. Sure, he gets on *some* level that it's much weirder for Phil than it had been for Techno and Tubbo, but he'd hoped it would have been done by now, that Phil would've gotten used to the late night sneak-ins and the slight scrapes and bruises.

Unfortunately for the both of them, it seems like that's not gonna happen anytime soon. "I'm fine, I'm going to be fine, I *always* get back up again," Tommy reminds him. Phil gives him a flat look, and Tommy pouts. "I do! I've only fainted *one time* so far this month!"

"Only one-do you have *any idea* how that sounds?" Phil asks, more baffled than upset, and Tommy grimaces sympathetically. Yeah, that had sounded much better in his head. Phil huffs and shakes his head, nudging the plate of snacks towards Tommy again. "Alright, well, I won't... we'll keep talking about this later. Change out of your

suit and come downstairs, Kristin's almost done with dinner."

Tommy gives him a small smile, and Phil taps Tommy's leg with the end of his cane before he leaves the room. Well, he could definitely do with dinner, so he tucks his suit in the back of his closet and grabs some comfortable clothes. Just because he hadn't gotten *terribly* injured today doesn't mean he's about to put anything scratchy over his bruises.

There's no one upstairs from what he can tell, but there's a lot of chatter coming from the dining room. Ah. Sally's probably over again; more often than not, Wilbur's attached to her at the hip, absolutely smitten. Tommy thinks it's dumb, but at least with Sally here, Wilbur can be annoying elsewhere.

Sure enough, when Tommy enters the dining room, Wilbur and Sally are huddled around Wil's laptop, excitedly chattering. "Hello, Sally, lovely to see you," Tommy says, giving her a smile and a nod, and he grins as he turns to Wilbur. "Hello, bitch. Looking particularly ugly today, king."

"I will throw this at you," Wilbur threatens, waving a cup in his direction menacingly, and Tommy rolls his eyes as he sits across from the two of them. Wilbur turns back to Sally and nods towards the screen. "This one seems pretty alright, don't you think?"

"Yeah, but does it run on gas or electric? Can't stand electric stovetops, the food isn't nearly as good," Sally says firmly, and Wilbur tuts, clicking on something. Tommy gives Sally an inquisitive look, and she beams, clearly excited. "Wil and I are looking for a flat!"

Well that's... news.

Tommy blanks out for a moment. "Uh, what?" he asks, rather stupidly, and Wilbur nods.

"We figured since Phil's doing so well now, and things are a lot less hectic, we should move in together. I mean, it's a bit fast, but Sally's lease is up come the end of this month, and I've been looking to move out for *ages*, so it's perfect timing," he says, and Tommy

blinks. Wilbur and Sally exchange a loving look, and Tommy makes a face. “It just feels like the right thing for us, y’know?”

“Uh, no, I *don’t* know,” Tommy says, and Techno comes in with a platter of potatoes, setting it down in the middle of the table. Tommy huffs. “Have you heard about this? Wilbur’s moving out.”

“Oh, yeah, I keep tellin’ him to send me the link to whatever site he’s gettin’ his listings from. I’m thinkin’ something a little bigger, but I’ll take what I can get,” Techno says, and Tommy feels his soul leave his body for a bit. Techno raises a brow at him. “My graduation’s comin’ up, man, and I don’t wanna live at home forever.”

That’s all well and good, but what’s gonna happen when they’re gone? “I mean, *obviously*, but you’re not... you’re not leaving *yet*, are you?” Tommy asks, trying very hard to say it nonchalantly, but judging by the way Techno’s brows pinch together, he’s not doing a very good job of it.

Wilbur and Sally exchange another look. Tommy’s getting a little sick of that shit. “Toms, we’ll still come visit, it’s not as if we’re gonna be *gone*,” Wilbur says, and Tommy shifts uncomfortably in his seat. Wilbur pokes his arm. “You can come visit all you’d like too.”

“I’m keepin’ my swords here, plus I’m pretty sure if I *do* end up movin’, they won’t exactly let me have a workshop, not like the one we’ve got here,” Techno adds, and Tommy makes a face.

“Yeah, well, not like I give a shit, alright? I don’t care whether or not you come to visit, prick,” Tommy says, crossing his arms, and Techno looks amused. Dickhead. Wilbur’s brows furrow, and Tommy fiddles with the tablecloth as Kristin and Phil come out of the kitchen. He doesn’t know why his chest feels so tight. “So that’s just fuckin’ *it*, then, I guess. No more shitty family dinners or stupid movie nights. Good. That’s great. Fuck how *I* feel, right?”

Phil blinks, and Tommy rolls his eyes as Techno comes to sit next to him. “Tommy, this isn’t—it doesn’t have anything to do with *you*,” Techno says, probably hoping that he sounds somewhat comforting, and Tommy scoffs.

“Oh, fan-fucking-tastic, then. When were *you* gonna say anything about it? Were you just gonna be *gone* and tell me you’ve moved after the fact?” Tommy asks flatly. He turns his glare towards Wilbur, who looks just as shocked as the rest of them. Bastards, the lot of them. “Congrats on being the *second* brother to abandon me. Techno’s got a head start, and apparently he’s leaving too, you oughta up your game.”

Kristin steps forward, both confused and slightly taken aback. “Tommy, that’s not fair to them-”

“No, what’s not *fair* is that they’re both fucking *leaving*, out of *nowhere*, no discussion about it, just doing it to *spite me*-”

“We’re *adults*, Tommy, we can’t just spend our entire lives in the same house,” Techno tells him, annoyingly reasonable.

Tommy lets out a harsh bark of a laugh. “Sure! Let’s act like you two are the most mature motherfuckers at the table! Like you weren’t arguing over who was the fucking favorite just a couple months ago! Because it’s *totally* not like you both have communication issues the size of planet fucking Earth! No, you’re both *mature adults*-”

“What is your *problem*?!” Wilbur asks, eyes wide, and Tommy’s brain latches onto that, grips it with white knuckles, makes it the only question bouncing around his skull, making his head pound to the point of migraine-level pain.

“What’s my problem?” Tommy repeats, deadly quiet, yanking his arm away from Techno as he tries to put a hand there. “Wouldn’t you just fucking *love* to know? Because *Wilbur* has to know everything, *Wilbur* has to play puppetmaster to get what he wants, *Wilbur* just *has* to hear about every fucking detail about every fucking thing even if *some* people don’t want to fucking *talk about it*-”

“Tommy,” Techno hisses, “cut it out-”

“Oh! Oh, now *Techno* wants to pretend like his opinion’s *worth* something to me! Like I need his *approval* before I do shit for myself!” Tommy grits out. “Like I need to listen to his fucking *ground rules*. Because *Techno* wants to be a good big brother after ten

fucking years of ignoring me! *Techno* wants to feel good about himself, like he's not leaving me *again*-"

"Low fucking blow," Wilbur cuts in. "Tommy, seriously-"

"Like this *isn't*?! Haven't we had enough things change for half a *fucking* year?!" Tommy bellows, slamming a hand on the table. It cracks. Tommy's hands are shaking. His voice comes out barely above a whisper now. "I'm so... so *tired* of change."

Nothing but silence. Tommy's chair screeches as he pushes it back and stands, turning to go back upstairs. Phil is the first to move. "Here, Toms, let me make you a plate before you go-"

"I'm not hungry," Tommy says, dull, hollowed out, and he heads up to his room, closing the door gently behind him.

He sits down on the ground and leans against the door, taking deep breaths. He can't fall apart now. Not after he'd just blown up at all of them. It had been undeserved, he'd overreacted, he *knows* that. He feels nauseous. There'd been no need for that, why had he *done* that? What had been the *point*? That's not-he *knows* it's not healthy, but it was as if he couldn't stop himself. Like he'd just bubbled over and *everything* had spilled.

His emotions feel so scattered that he couldn't *possibly* name what it was that had made him go ballistic like that. The crack of the table echoes in his mind. Since when had he gotten *violent*? That's not... he's not *like that*. He doesn't *do that*. He's been coping, he's been good about making sure he doesn't have panic attacks, he's been *going to therapy*. Not only had he fought with Phil earlier, but now he's yelling at Wilbur and Techno for no good reason.

Techno's been trying to repair things. He'd *listened* to Tommy, given him that camera, he'd *apologized*. Wilbur's been better about being overbearing, he's tried to be supportive while giving Tommy the space he needs. Tommy shouldn't have said any of what he'd said. He shouldn't dwell on their mistakes, shouldn't make *them* dwell on their mistakes. He'd brought up things that had already been resolved, things he'd thought he'd moved on from.

What's *wrong* with him?

There's a gentle knock on the door. "You need to eat, so I brought you some stuff," Techno says quietly, muffled, and Tommy's lip starts to tremble. "C'mon, kid, nobody's mad at you. I know you're tired of hearing it, but we're all just... worried."

Tommy takes a quiet, shaky breath. "I didn't mean it," he says, voice cracking a little.

"I know," Techno tells him. Tommy leans his head against the door. There's a long bit of silence that lingers in the worst way. "I'll, uh... I'll leave the food out here, okay? You don't have to come back downstairs if you don't want to."

"Okay," Tommy says.

"Okay," Techno repeats.

There's the slight clink of silverware, and then Techno's footsteps retreat.

Tommy closes his eyes. He'll apologize later.

They're shooting at him.

The cops are shooting at *him*.

As if he's not just swinging through the city on patrol. As if *he's* the domestic terrorist, and not 404, who he'd just chased off. "What the fuck?!" Tommy squawks as a bullet grazes his shoulder, and Tubbo yelps out in alarm over the comms.

"Are they fucking shooting at you?!" he shouts, and Tommy nods frantically, trying *really* hard to avoid the spray of gunfire. He ducks behind a nearby building, panting. Tubbo huffs. *"Oh, you have got to be kidding me, I'm gonna-know what? I'll be back in a minute, I'm gonna scream at them over the police radio."*

"Careful not to get caught," Tommy says, still slightly dazed, and

Tubbo hums. Leaning against the brick, Tommy glances down at himself. Most of the bullets had missed-a couple had gone right by him, maybe scraped him, but it's not bad. None of them had actually sunk in, so that'll save him a headache later on. "Hey, Hive, you comin' back?"

"I'm here, I'm here. Left them off with a ten-hour long video of complete silence interrupted by vine booms, so that'll annoy them for the rest of the day. Fuckers. I'd destroy their systems, but I kinda need those so you can take care of crime," Tubbo says, sounding mad as hell, and Tommy doesn't blame him.

Sure, things have gotten worse under Schlatt, but Tommy hadn't thought they'd get *this* bad. If the police not allowing an ambulance through for him had been bad, this is *abysmal*. The worst it's gotten until now is cops actively trying to arrest him once they get to whatever crime scene he's wrapped up for them. And while that had been inconvenient, sure, it hadn't been *gunfire, holy shit, this is insane*.

"Can you patch Boar and Crow in?" Tommy asks, and Tubbo hums. The codenames had been Phil's idea-"Just in case you need us while you're out and about, mate."-and Tommy's quite fond of them now. Plus, he never knows when he's being watched anymore. Unless he's in his alleyway, he doesn't refer to any of them by name anymore. There's a soft couple of clicks, and Tommy sighs. "Uh, bad news, fellas. The cops got worse."

"Didn't know that was possible," Techno says, and Tubbo snorts. Things are still tentative, still uneasy, but they're better. *"What's the situation?"*

Tommy takes a deep breath. "Well, uh, nothing *crazy*. Nothing that I've not dealt with before, so just, uh... just know that, first and foremost," he says, and Tubbo scoffs.

"The cops are shooting at him now. Schlatt's probably convincing the press that this is a 'good' thing as we speak," Tubbo grumbles, and Phil sounds as though he's choking on something.

"For the love of-alright, I can come pick you up if it's not safe to

swing home," Techno offers, and Tommy's stomach lurches at the idea of having to be in that car. Techno hesitates, then groans. "Will didn't carpool with Sally this morning, can't switch cars with him. Crap."

Phil finally gets a hold of himself. *"Wait, what's wrong with your car?"* he asks, and Tommy winces. *"Oh, uh, nobody, just a client. Yeah, I'll get to it in a minute. No, no, I'm-well, I am busy, let me finish up here-okay. Love you."*

Techno snorts, and Tommy stifles a laugh. *"Tell Kristin your 'client' says hi,"* Tubbo snickers, and Phil huffs. Tubbo's usual typing starts up, and there's a beat of silence before he starts talking again, sounding slightly stunned. *"Well, I think I've found you a way to get home after all, Tommy."*

"Oh? And how's that?" Tommy asks, glancing around the corner to make sure no one's coming, and Tubbo huffs, but it's one of disbelief rather than annoyance.

"Well, there's a protest happening a couple of blocks over," Tubbo explains, and Techno gives a half-hearted whoop. *"They're protesting on your behalf, so I'm sure they wouldn't mind providing a bit of a distraction to let you get home."*

"Finally, some people with common sense," Phil says, exasperated, and Tommy chuckles.

"Alright, well, tell me where they are, and I'll head over there," Tommy says, and a location pop-up immediately appears in his vision. "Sorry to bother you guys for nothing, then, but I'll see you when I get home, yeah? I'll, uh... I'll keep you updated. Love you."

"Love you," Phil and Techno chorus before Tubbo takes them off the line, and Tommy starts to swing towards the direction of the protest.

Tommy narrowly avoids a rogue bullet as he dashes across rooftops-apparently the cops have fucking snipers or something at the ready, that's lovely-and he ducks down into an alleyway, slightly surprised to see a *massive* crowd of people. "Right, so, who's heading this thing? Like, who's organized it?" he asks, trying to keep

quiet. They haven't seen him yet, which bodes well, considering he's kind of counting on their discretion.

Tubbo's rapid typing starts up again. "*Holy fuck! It's Ranboo!*" he shouts, and Tommy winces.

Then he wheezes. "Wait, *what?!*"

"Ranboo helped organize a fucking protest, how did I not know about this?!" Tubbo says, and Tommy swings up onto a rooftop above the crowd, scanning it for any sight of Ranboo.

Sure enough, there he is, at the front of the crowd with a megaphone and a sign reading *Decriminalize Heroes!* in huge letters around a spraypainted image of Tommy's mask. "We want justice for the city's protector!" Ranboo shouts, and the guy next to him whoops and lifts up his sign-it says *Vigilante justice is still justice!* in the middle of a spider-web. "What's *Schlatt* doing to reduce crime?!"

"Nothing!" the crowd screams in unison.

"And what's *Spider-Man* doing?!"

"Everything!"

The call-and-response is kind of charming.

Tommy hops down from the rooftop and lands in front of Ranboo, receiving a deafening cheer from the crowd. "Well, didn't know I had so many fans," he says lightly, and Ranboo stammers out something incoherent.

He seems to collect himself, and he lowers the megaphone, still rather shocked. "Uh, hi! Mr. Spider-Man, sir, wh-how did you-what are you doing here?" he asks, and the person next to him elbows him.

"You didn't tell us you knew him personally!" they say, giving Tommy a nervous smile. "Hi! I'm Aimsey, I helped Ranboo get this protest together! We're a whole Spider-Man support group, y'know! A couple of the bigger stan accounts and update accounts got

together and organized the protest!"

Ranboo lets out a nervous laugh. "Yep! That's what we did! And, uh, I don't know him personally, I just-he saved me this one time and-wait, seriously, what are you doing here? Did you see us on the news or something? Are we on the *news*?" he asks, and Tommy shakes his head.

"Dunno about the news, just heard about it through the grapevine. Bit of an ego boost, if I'm being honest," Tommy jokes, though he hears sirens way off in the distance. Not close enough for the protestors to hear, but too close for comfort. "So, um-Aimsey, was it?"

"Yeah! That's Eryn, and that's Freddie," they say, pointing out the two people closest to them, and Tommy nods.

"Right, well, you lot, can I ask a favor?" he asks, and they nod. The crowd's starting to get restless, shifting and continuing to try and push forward. Tommy's gotta make this quick. "See, well, the cops have gotten around to trying to shoot me out of the sky, so if you guys could, uh, distract 'em for a bit so I can get home, that'd be great."

"They're *shooting* at you? What the fuck?" one of them-Eryn, if Tommy's remembering right-says, and he lifts his own megaphone up. "Hey! They're *shooting* at Spider-Man! Are we gonna fuckin' take that lying down?!"

"No!" the crowd yells, and Tommy blinks in slight surprise.

"Be as much of an inconvenience as you can be! Cause a headache without disturbing the peace! Don't give them an excuse to arrest you!" Ranboo shouts, and the crowd cheers. Ranboo lowers his megaphone, and Tommy grins. "Get home safe, Spider-Man. We've got your back."

There are cop cars pulling closer now, and Eryn breaks away from the front of the crowd, letting off one of those colored smoke bombs. "Hey, dickheads, look over this way!" he shouts, and Tommy dashes off towards an alleyway, watching in amusement as Freddie pulls

out a massive confetti popper and sets it off, Aimsey holding up their phone to blast music through their megaphone.

It's rather entertaining to watch, but at the same time, Tommy feels both worried and immensely emotional. They're all protesting for *him*, to keep *him* safe, just like he's kept *them* safe.

Tommy will have to dwell on it later. He's got to get back home.

Things are still tentative there, after all, and he's determined to fix it.

Oh boy! Tommy's emotional state is getting more and more volatile, that can't be good! Surely this can't mean that he's not actually adjusting as well as he says he is. We've also got Ranboo leading protests now! Him and the cricket crew, my absolute beloveds! The whole weird lapses in memory and zoning out thing that Ranboo's experiencing can't possibly get in the way! (Also, Ranboo has absolutely transformed his anti account into a stan account, he's just very embarrassed about it and Will Not Admit It if asked)

Art list:

[This art](#) is based off of ch42 and is absolutely heart-wrenching ;-;

[This art](#) showing The Sense going off is super cool!!

[This interpretation of Tommy's suit](#) is also ridiculously awesome :D

[This design of Automata](#) makes me go absolutely feral omg

[This really cool design](#) of Spider-Tommy

[These sketches](#) have super dynamic poses, and the design is so cool!!

[These sketches](#) are cute as hell :D

[This absolutely incredible piece](#) blows my mind every time I look at it

[This sketch of Spider-Innit](#) is so cute, he has little knee pads!!

[This](#) absolutely phenomenal design of Spider-Innit, it lives in my brain rent-free, go check it out!!

[These](#) adorable doodles :D

[This](#) amazing watercolor piece!

[This insanely cool art](#) that looks straight out of a comic book!

[This design](#) for Tommy is awesome :D

[This](#) Spider-Innit design is so good!

[This doodle](#) of Spider-Innit is really cute!! The pose is really dynamic :D

[This absolutely incredible sheet](#) for a Spider-Tommy design, I love the little notes!

[This mock-up poster](#) is insanely cool!!! It's got all the villains in the background with Tommy in an *awesome* dynamic pose in the front :D

who are you, really?

Chapter 53: who are you, really?

Tommy goes back to see if he can find anything in Quackity's deserted headquarters, and Tubbo discovers something interesting.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Tommy tries a new password.

It does not work.

Groaning, he slumps back into the dusty office chair, and Tubbo hums uncertainly on the other side of the comms. *"I'm trying to figure this out, but I really can't, bossman. Is there anywhere you can hook Shroud up to?"* he asks, and Tommy inspects the PC, brightening up at the sight of a USB port. Shroud unfolds from his hoodie, and one of the leg segments pops open to reveal a drive. Shroud connects to the computer, and Tubbo cackles. *"Can't believe the cops didn't catch this, it's such a rookie move. They 'wiped' the computers, sure, but they didn't wipe them, there's still traces I can chase back to get the information."*

Tommy pumps a fist in the air triumphantly. "Fuck yeah! Alright, big man, what do you want me to explore now?" he asks, rolling backwards on the chair and glancing around. Tubbo had gotten the idea to go back to Quackity's evacuated headquarters. Since Tubbo had tipped off the cops about it, they'd had to leave in a hurry, and the two of them figured that some things might've been left behind in the chaos.

Tubbo hums thoughtfully. *"Well, you could go look at the weapons development labs. Anything they'd left is probably locked up in*

evidence, but I'm sure we can get an idea of how their operation works if we snoop around a bit," he says, and Tommy nods firmly, heading out of the room to walk down the halls. There's still a hole in one of the walls from his fight with Quackity here, and Tubbo snickers. *"You totally kicked his ass. Dislocated his shoulder and everything."*

Wincing, Tommy ducks into one of the development labs. "God, don't remind me. I've still gotta look that bastard in the eye when I've head boy shit to take care of," he grumbles. The lab is pristine-cleaned up by crime scene investigators, probably-but it looks like a pretty standard assembly line. "I don't think they're making much of the serious shit here. Just a place to make guns and distribute 'em, from what I can tell."

"Mhm," Tubbo hums, clearly distracted, and Tommy pouts. Rude. He clears his throat, but Tubbo still doesn't respond.

"Hey, dickhead, I'm talking to you," Tommy says, a little huffy, and Tubbo gasps. Tommy immediately goes on alert, fists raised, and The Sense at the ready. "What? What is it? What's wrong? Who's here?!"

"No, no, nothing like that, I just-I got in!" Tubbo says, and Tommy blinks in surprise, his defensive stance faltering a little.

"You're hearing back from universities *already*?" he asks, a little bewildered, and Tubbo groans.

"No, you idiot, I got into the system! I found the source company for the 'Guided Evolution' project!" Tubbo says, clearly excited, and Tommy's eyes go wide. *"I had to sort through a bunch of shit from the computers to get to it, but there's an access key in their files! It was set up to scramble the encryption of the blocks so that you can get in and read through the information, dunno why the hell it's here, though. They hadn't even used it-they probably didn't even know it was there, judging by how weird the pathway was to get to it. It's a really discreet backdoor program, I could only access it by tracing the connection to the nearest tower and working backwards. Now that I'm really looking at it, it's more of an open window from the surveillance software it released into Quackity's system. As far as I*

can tell, this doesn't really have anything to do with the business Quackity's doing-"

"Hey! Don't read it without me, dickhead," Tommy says, hurrying back to the computer and hesitating when he reaches for Shroud. "Uh, can I take Shroud back, or do you need him to stay plugged in?"

"Take him out, and hurry your ass back here! There's so much in these files, Tommy," Tubbo says in awe, and Tommy unplugs Shroud, impatient as the little drone folds back into his sweatshirt. *"Oh my God, there's another fucking subject."*

"There's *what?!'*" Tommy yells, alarmed, and he hops up into the vents; as much as he hates it, it's the fastest way out. He scrambles to get out, and he swings out over the skyline once he's finally out of the vents, keeping himself as high as possible.

The backlash that the 'shoot first, answer questions later' policy that Schlatt had given the cops had been overwhelming, and while there aren't as *many* officers that actively shoot at him now, there's still a dangerous amount of them. As long as Tommy keeps to the skies, they usually don't bother him. It's when he's stopped a criminal on the street that he has to be careful about not getting shot.

He drops down into his usual alleyway and hurries to change, giving Henry a brief pat before he starts fucking *sprinting* towards Tubbo's house. Tommy's never been known as a very patient person, but with this, he's *especially* impatient. Finally, *finally*, he's going to get to understand exactly what's changed about him, exactly what's different. He'll know how his powers truly work, to the fullest extent he can; he'll know precisely what makes him something other than purely human, what *separates* him.

Tommy's out of breath by the time he gets to the doorstep, one hand on his knee as he reaches up with the other to knock. Puffy opens the door, blinking in surprise. "Did you... run here?" she asks, and Tommy nods, trying to catch his breath. Puffy stifles a smile behind her hand. "Come in, kiddo, get yourself some water or something-"

"No time," Tommy pants, nudging his way past her and dashing up

the stairs. He practically throws Tubbo's bedroom door open, eyes crazed and hair wild. "You've-hah-you've got the files now?"

Tubbo blinks at him. "Thanks for knocking," he says flatly, and Tommy flips him off, still catching his breath. Tubbo glances back at one of his monitors warily, and he gives Tommy a grim look. "You're, uh... you're gonna wanna sit down for this."

Tommy nods, flopping down on Tubbo's bed. "Tell it to me straight, doc," he says once he's finally got his shit together, "how fucked am I?"

"*You* aren't very fucked, all things considered, but... subjects one and two definitely are," Tubbo says, clearly uneasy. Tommy sits up abruptly. There hadn't been any mention of a second subject in the file they'd found in the lab from the tube line, and this is *definitely* something he's interested in. Tubbo swallows. "Um, apparently, they'd gotten a willing test subject, and that's when they'd gotten additional funding. They disregarded the spider thing for this guy because the spiders weren't mature yet-this was apparently administered in a syringe-but once they gave it to the guy, it went... wrong."

"How wrong?" Tommy asks, shuddering. The Sense doesn't much like discussing this-he can tell. Tubbo makes a face, and Tommy takes a deep breath. "Just... just read it out, Big T."

"If you say so," Tubbo says, clearly reluctant, which The Sense *adamantly* hates. Tubbo clears his throat and leans closer to the monitor. "Right, uh... ah. Here. 'Subject two's'-I don't know how to pronounce that, but it's a gene, I think. 'Subject two's'-whatever-'should be more compatible with the infection. It isn't the ideal gene, but it will have to do. We have no way of finding a willing test subject with the specific gene we're looking for, so subject two has agreed to a waiver absolving us of any liability in the case of'-okay, now they're just listing horrific medical conditions, we don't need to go through those."

Tommy makes a face. "What are the results of the test?" he asks, and Tubbo's shoulders tense up. That's not good, then. "It's alright, Tubs, we both know I have the gene, I'm gonna be fine, this isn't-

you're not gonna scare me by telling me or some shit, alright?"

Nodding, Tubbo scrolls down a bit. "It says, uh... 'Subject two is experiencing severe short term memory loss. None of the intended beneficial side effects have come into play as of yet. It's nearing an hour now after the initial infection. Results do not look hopeful. This is quite disappointing,'" Tubbo says. He turns back to glance at Tommy, and Tommy gives him a determined look in return. He wants to know. Tubbo turns back toward the monitor. "'Subject two is now beyond saving in terms of memory. He does not remember his own name. This gene is clearly as incompatible as mine had been-'"

"Wait!" Tommy cuts in, and Tubbo immediately freezes. "The person writing, that *has* to be subject one, right?"

Tubbo blinks. "I guess so, yeah. That'd make a lot of sense," he mutters, scanning over the files, and Tommy wrings his hands. Whoever subject one is, they'd been really determined to find whatever answers they're looking for. Tubbo hums. "Um, then it goes into a lot of technical stuff, medial terms, things like that... oh! It says, 'Subject two is now incompatible with another trial, but judging by subject two's now-scrambled DNA, he could be compatible with an entirely separate... project...' Tommy, this is... Tommy, I think subject two is-I'm not sure, but-"

"Who? Who is it?" Tommy asks. He wants to know, he *has* to know. If there's someone out there that's even remotely like him, Tommy wants to know who it is. Tubbo just shakes his head, looking oddly pale. "Who is it, Tubbo?!"

"Charlie," Tubbo says, sounding as though all the wind's been knocked out of him, "it's Charlie."

"What?" Tommy asks numbly.

"I think subject two is-Tommy, I really think it's Charlie," Tubbo says, a little shaky, and Tommy wraps his arms around himself. *Fuck*. If the trial, the 'infection,' the same thing that *Tommy's* got had let him

bond with the Slime symbiote, then what the fuck does that mean for Tommy? A bit unsure still, Tubbo looks over at him. "Do you... d'you want me to keep going?"

Tommy nods firmly. "Yes. Don't-I have to know," he says.

"Okay. Holy shit. Okay. 'The symbiote project is definitely compatible with subject two's DNA. If we manage to get him to infiltrate that huge arms dealer ring, get close to the head of the operation, we can not only take financial control, but I can practically run the city. Of course, it's going to be difficult, considering subject two's lapse in memory,'" Tubbo reads out, and Tommy feels nauseous. Does Charlie even know what he's doing? Is he double-crossing purposefully, or is he just being used? "I think that we should wipe his memory again. It will be risky, but the benefits outweigh the risks. With that much money, I could... I could get our overseas associate a position as mayor. London would be completely under my thumb, and no one would know. Not even... not even my closest confidants."

The silence that follows is heavy.

"If I had to take a wild guess," Tommy says slowly, "you don't... you don't think that subject one is..."

He trails off, too afraid of the implications to finish his sentence, but Tubbo seems to understand exactly what he means anyway. "Oh, *fuck*," he says, and yeah, Tommy's on the same page. Tubbo shakes his head. "No, there's no *way*. There's just-okay, hang on, let me look at some of the later entries."

Tommy nods numbly, head in his hands. *Automata* is like him. There's no fucking *way* that they're... they can't be remotely the same. *Automata* is a monster, surely he's always *been* a monster, there's no way that the bite is what made him the way that he is. There's no way *Tommy's* gonna end up like that.

Then again...

He's been irrationally angry lately. He's been lashing out. His emotions have been *everywhere* and *nowhere*, and Tommy keeps

feeling like he's not even in control of his own emotions. But Charlie seems fine! Does he? Or had he actually agreed to do whatever it is they'd told him to do because the injection had driven him mad?

"Fuck," Tommy chokes out, "Tubbo, I-I don't-I can't end up like that, I..."

His chest feels tight, his hands are shaky, and Tommy can feel his heartbeat pick up exponentially as he wraps his arms around himself again. Surely not. Surely, his powers wouldn't betray him like that. The Sense chirps worriedly at the back of his mind, and a shock of *fear* goes down Tommy's spine. Should he be scared of The Sense? Is that what had corrupted the other two? Fuck, when is it gonna get to *him*? Just because whatever gene he has *happens* to be compatible with spider superpowers doesn't mean he's exempt from whatever the hell-

"Tommy! You have to calm down, you're hurting yourself!" Tubbo says, snapping him out of his trance, and Tommy startles, flinching violently as he moves his hands away from his body. The parts of his sides his fingers had scratched into are bleeding sluggishly. Tubbo hurries to grab some plasters, and Tommy sits there, unresponsive, as Tubbo patches him up. "Christ, bossman, what even got you thinking that you would...?"

Tommy looks at him, mentally cursing the way his eyes start to water. "Tubbo, I've been so *angry* lately," he whispers, because he can't bear to say it loudly, to be concrete about it. "I've argued with everyone *so much over nothing*, I'm-I'm so *paranoid* all the time, a-and I... Tubbo, I got *violent* the other day."

"What? Tommy what are you on about?"

"I slammed my hand on the table," Tommy tells him, rather meek. He's not proud of it, not exactly happy with the fact that he'd lost his temper enough to show it physically. "Tubbo, the table *cracked*. It's a miracle it didn't break, honestly, I just-I got so *mad*, and I couldn't say what was so bad about it, because I didn't *know*, and I *lost it*."

Tubbo blinks at him. "Tommy," he says slowly, deliberately, "do you think that your emotional state being unstable could have anything

to do with the fact that you've faced more trauma in the past couple of months than most people have faced in their entire lives?"

A little taken aback, Tommy huffs in disbelief. "Well, I mean, sure, I'm a little-I wouldn't call it *unstable*, but-that can't... I thought I was over all of that, though," he says quietly. "I'm in therapy and shit, I-I can't-it can't *just* be that, can it?"

"Well, I imagine being a teenager also doesn't help, hormones n' all that," Tubbo says, idly setting the first-aid kit to the side and giving Tommy a sad smile. "I wouldn't blame you if you stopped holding back in fights, y'know."

Tommy's brows furrow. "What the fuck? Why would I do that?" he scoffs, because that's an inherently insane thing to say. "Tubbo, you can't be serious. If I wasn't holding back, I could *kill someone*."

"So? It's not like they're giving you the same courtesy," Tubbo snaps, and Tommy's mouth abruptly shuts. While Tubbo has a point... he can't *kill* people. Does he believe that maybe, on some level, it would be only fair to stop holding back? Kind of. But he's not about to do that to himself, not about to have someone's *life* in his hands. The mere idea of that terrifies him, paralyzes him, and Tommy adamantly refuses to do that to himself. Tubbo sighs. "Sorry, bossman, I'm just-I'm really tense right now."

"It's fine. I'm fine. I'm not-the spiralling's done for now. Can you-is there anything else in the file?" he asks, and Tubbo reluctantly leaves his side to go back to the computer.

"There's, uh, some stuff about you-well, there's stuff about Spider-Man-but it's mostly just them saying how they need you alive. There's nothing specific about what they want to do if they get you. Oh! Oh, *shit*," Tubbo says, eyes wide. "Tommy, that-isn't that Kristin's company?!"

Tommy feels like he's been punched. "Sorry, *what?!*"

He rushes forward, and Tubbo points at the single mention of the company name. "It's Smile Research, right? That's where she works, isn't it?" Tubbo asks, and Tommy just stares at the two

words, jaw slack with shock. "I mean, according to the file, it's a top-secret project. Only, like, eight people total know about it. It's a huge company, too, you don't think-there's no way she's part of this, right?"

Tommy stumbles back. "No, no, no, this can't be happening," he mumbles. "It's just not possible, it's *not*, she *wouldn't*."

Tubbo gives him a determined look. "Well, there's only one way to find out," he says, "you're gonna have to ask her."

Tommy narrows his eyes. "I will be doing no such thing."

Tommy knocks on the door to the home office.

"Come in!" Kristin calls, and Tommy takes a deep breath. He can do this. It's just talking with his mum about a super secret project apparently headed by her company that's inadvertently given him superpowers. Just a totally normal mother-son conversation. Definitely. He pushes the door open, and Kristin looks up, brows raised slightly. "Oh, hey! What's up, Toms?"

"Uh. How's your... uh, day... going...?" he asks, because how the *fuck* is he going to naturally segue into this?! Kristin blinks at him, and Tommy's brain goes into full panic mode. "I'm only asking because-well, listen, I just-I was actually really interested in the thing that you do for work-the research thing? Yeah. That. I wanna, um... can you tell me more about it?"

Kristin laughs a little. "I would've thought you'd find all this kinda boring," she admits, and Tommy smiles nervously. What if Kristin is working with the supervillains? What if she knows who Automata is?! Oh, *fuck*, that would be so bad. Kristin's brows furrow, and she gives him a funny sort of look. "Are you okay? You're, uh... you're shaking a little, there, bud."

Swallowing, Tommy nods as he flexes his fingers in an attempt to keep his hands somewhat steady. "Yeah, no, I'm-I'm good. It's fine. I'm fine," he says, and Kristin doesn't quite look like she believes

him, but she nods anyway. Tommy rolls his shoulders. "So, um, d'you-can you tell me? About your job?"

"Well, sure, what d'you wanna know?" Kristin asks, and Tommy shrugs. If he just comes right out and says the name of what's supposed to be a highly confidential project, Kristin's gonna know something's up. She hums. "Alright, so what I do is more of the research and management side of things. I keep track of experiment results and data, I delegate any further trials or heavy reading to my co-workers, and I'm the person that most people report to. If there's a project, my name's probably somewhere on it."

And if that just isn't a punch to the gut. "What, um-what kind of projects? Like stuff with machines? O-Or maybe, like, medicine?" Tommy asks, hoping to every God that he can think of that she won't say anything in the *realm* of Guided Evolution.

"Well, right now, the company's only working on a few. Funding's a bit tight-not that I'm complaining, a lot of our money went to Phil's firm, which is a win-win for us-so I'm just in charge of... three? I think?" she hums, and Tommy nods for her to go ahead. Kristin smiles softly at him. "I mean, I obviously can't tell you *all* of the details, there's some confidential legal stuff and all that."

Tommy swallows down his nausea and tries to find comfort in the fact that The Sense isn't going off. *Then again, it hadn't gone off for Quackity either.* He can't think like that. God, he's so fucking *paranoid*. Just because one person's let him down, just because one person's betrayed him, it doesn't mean everyone else in his life is out to get him.

He grins, albeit a little shakily. "So, uh, what details *can* you tell me? Anything cool? Any of that crazy shit that's, like, straight out of a sci-fi movie?" Tommy asks, and Kristin scoffs.

"You are *severely* overestimating how cool my job is," she tells him, and Tommy doesn't know whether or not to feel comforted by that. Kristin pokes at her mouse, probably to keep the monitor awake, and she frowns thoughtfully. "One of the projects *is* a potential treatment for chronic pain, so the medicine thing was pretty on point. The other two are your standard bio-research company projects-

improvements for robotic prosthetics that rely on brainwaves to communicate, updates for pacemakers that would detect irregularities way ahead of time, stuff like that.”

The tension dissipates. “Oh, cool, cool, so... no stuff with genetics?” Tommy asks, and Kristin’s brows furrow. Uh oh. “You know, ‘cuz, like, in the movies, scientists are always like ‘Woah, we came up with a way to turn everybody into lizards!’ and stuff. Like, changing DNA or whatever.”

Kristin lets out a laugh at that. “Well, I can promise you that nobody’s gonna be turning into anything anytime soon. And no, I don’t think any of our projects are focused on genetics. At least, not any projects I have jurisdiction over,” she says. Then she blinks, the way she does when she’s remembered something. Tommy straightens up a bit. Kristin huffs, slightly amused by whatever it is that she’s thinking of. “Y’know, I think we *might*, actually.”

Tommy feels faint. “Oh?” he asks, and she nods.

“Yeah, no, I was-it’s weird, because I had no idea about it, but a couple of months ago, these two investigators came in. You probably know one of them, he’s Wil’s friend. Jack, I think it was? Anyway, they started asking me about this one project...” she trails off, tutting. “Dammit, I can’t remember what the name was. But I couldn’t find anything in the database, so I figured, y’know, maybe it was higher up in the food chain. Apparently not, though. Sapnap said he’d never heard of it either, so if there *is* anything, it’s *super* high up.”

Feigning shock, Tommy crosses his arms. “Huh. So you-like, you had no fuckin’ *clue* what they were talking about?” he asks, just to be sure, *he has to be sure*.

Kristin shakes her head. “Beats me. Whatever Jack and his friend were trying to find, it wasn’t something in my database,” she says with a shrug.

The relief Tommy feels is like none he’s ever felt before.

He can trust her.

Of *course* he can trust her.

But it's not like he can reveal his identity to her.

What if she lets something slip? What if someone finds out that she knows-what if *Automata* finds out? Or Blaze? Or 404? Or *Quackity*?! If Kristin's endangered because of him, Tommy would never be able to forgive himself. He's already put so many people at risk-his dad, his brother, his *best fucking friend* for crying out loud-and he's not about to do it to anybody else, not as long as he can help it.

Tommy gives Kristin a weak smile. "Well, thanks for, uh, talking to me," he says, and Kristin's face does a funny sort of thing where she goes from a smile to a worried frown to a confused sort of pout. "What I meant was... thanks for keeping me in the loop, I guess."

"You don't have to *thank* me," she says. "Anything you wanna know, okay, kid? I'll be as transparent with you as they'll legally let me."

Tommy smiles at her again, then raps his knuckles on the desk twice as he turns to leave, trying not to break down into tears of joy in the middle of the fucking hallway. He'll just go into the bathroom and text Tubbo the good news and get his shit together. That's always a good plan, isn't it? That way, Techno and Phil won't fret over him, won't ask him whether or not patrol went wrong today. That way, Wilbur won't worry and feel as though he can't ask what's wrong, won't be scared that if he does, Tommy will push him away.

So Tommy locks the bathroom door behind him and takes a shaky deep breath, glancing down at his phone.

mum isn't in on it

fuck yeah! another win for the spider-squad :D

yeah

Tommy shuts his phone off and puts it on the edge of the basin, looking up at himself in the mirror. He hates how his reflection keeps on changing. He just wants to look like *him*. He doesn't want the ever-present furrow in between his eyebrows, doesn't want the bags under his eyes or the light scars across the parts of his face hidden

by his hair. He doesn't want his hair this fucking long, but who's got time for a haircut nowadays? Not him, not when there's a city to be saved, innocent lives to be protected.

He hates the way his hands shake as he looks in the mirror. The thought that who he's looking at now is a ticking time-bomb, a potential monster, someone capable of horrific destruction... it makes him feel sick to his stomach. But that's just it, isn't it? He's always *been* capable of destruction. He's always been *destroying* things.

At the age of eight, he'd destroyed his relationship with Techno, albeit unintentionally and unknowingly. At thirteen, he'd accidentally broken Wilbur's guitar. And since becoming Spider-Man, his relationships have become unrecognizable, so broken that he can't even begin to understand where the webs connect, where they break off.

He'd utterly ruined dinner just a few nights ago.

All because of these stupid, *stupid* feelings.

Feelings are fucking horrible. If Tommy could, he'd take all of this irrational fear, this slow-building distrust in himself, and he'd throw it down a garbage disposal. He'd toss it into an incinerator. He can't even fucking trust *himself* anymore. If he can't trust his own actions, how can he justify *anything*? Is he really saving Kristin and Wilbur from potential danger by keeping his identity secret? Is he just so paranoid that he can't fathom any other outcome?

What if Tommy *never* heals?

What if this *never* gets better?

What if he spends his entire *life* terrified of himself, of what he's capable of? What if he's stuck, ten, twenty, fifty years in the future, always bracing himself for what's around the next corner, for the next shitty thing to come his way?

That's not fucking fair.

It's not *fair*.

It's not fair.

It's not fair, it's not fair, it's not fair, it'snotfairit'snotfairit'snot-

Glass shatters.

His reflection is distorted now, sliced into delicate, jagged portions by the cracks in the mirror.

His knuckles are bleeding.

Had *he* done that?

Why is he so *angry*?

Why is this so *hard*?

Why can't he fix himself?!

This chapter? Oops! All angst!

Art list:

[This art](#) is based off of ch42 and is absolutely heart-wrenching ;-;

[This art](#) showing The Sense going off is super cool!!

[This interpretation of Tommy's suit](#) is also ridiculously awesome :D

[This design of Automata](#) makes me go absolutely feral omg

[This really cool design](#) of Spider-Tommy

[These sketches](#) have super dynamic poses, and the design is so cool!!

[These sketches](#) are cute as hell :D

[This absolutely incredible piece](#) blows my mind every time I look at it

[This sketch of Spider-Innit](#) is so cute, he has little knee pads!!

[This](#) absolutely phenomenal design of Spider-Innit, it lives in my brain rent-free, go check it out!!

[These](#) adorable doodles :D

[This](#) amazing watercolor piece!

[This insanely cool art](#) that looks straight out of a comic book!

[This design](#) for Tommy is awesome :D

[This](#) Spider-Innit design is so good!

[This doodle](#) of Spider-Innit is really cute!! The pose is really dynamic :D

[This absolutely incredible sheet](#) for a Spider-Tommy design, I love the little notes!

[This mock-up poster](#) is insanely cool!!! It's got all the villains in the background with Tommy in an *awesome* dynamic pose in the front :D

the comfort of fear

Chapter 54: the comfort of fear

Dream, Sapnap, and George come over for a celebratory dinner. Tommy admits he needs more help.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

“I need help tying my tie again,” Tommy says, avoiding any and all eye contact.

This sucks already.

Wilbur huffs out a little laugh, and he nudges Tommy’s shoulder. “Not shutting me out anymore, then?” he asks, and Tommy *does* look up to glare at him for that. Wilbur just rolls his eyes and starts to untangle the mess that’s become of Tommy’s attempt at a windsor knot. “How on *earth* d’you manage to do this every time?”

“What can I say? It’s a gift,” Tommy says flatly. Wilbur snorts, and he shifts the tie to hang a little longer on one side. Tommy takes a deep breath. “My tie isn’t, uh... it’s not the only thing I’ve fucked up lately.”

Wilbur looks at him, scans his face, and his expression settles into something worried. “Toms, I’m not... I’m not *mad* at you for what you said that night,” he says, and he does up the knot slowly-deliberately careful, as though he’s expecting Tommy to actually retain how to do it this time. “I’m a little hurt, sure, but we *did* blindside you a bit. To be honest, I’d just assumed I told you at some point, because I didn’t *mean* to keep it from you.”

Tommy shakes his head. “No, it’s-I was overreacting, Wil, I broke

the *table* for fuck's sakes," he says, and Wilbur gives him a sad laugh. Tommy glances away. "I have to remember that just because... just because *I'm* not okay yet, that doesn't mean that you have to, uh-also not be okay. You're allowed to be okay and I'm sorry I blew up at you for having already gotten your shit together, that's what I'm trying to say, I'm really shit at this, Wil-"

"Oh my God, you're an idiot," Wilbur laughs, tugging Tommy into a hug. Tommy freezes up a little before hugging back. Wilbur nudges the top of Tommy's head with his knuckles, and Tommy makes a face, pulling back. Wilbur smiles. "It's okay. No hard feelings."

Good. That's good. "Thanks," Tommy says quietly, "that's... that's really nice to hear."

Wilbur's brow furrows. "You seem off today," he says, then he shakes his head. "No, that's not-I mean, you've seemed a little off for a while, but-I just want you to know that if you ever need to talk about *anything*, I'm here for you, okay? Even when I've moved out, just call me. No matter how stupid it seems, I don't care. I just... I don't want you to feel like I'm not-that I'm abandoning you. I'm here, I'm *always* gonna be here."

"I didn't-I never meant any of it," Tommy says, throat feeling a little tight, and Wilbur gives him another one of those sad smiles. "It wasn't *you* that I was-I just took my anger out on you, Wil, it was all empty shit."

Throwing an arm around Tommy's shoulders, Wilbur smooths down his hair. "I know. It's fine, I promise. Water under the bridge," he says, and Tommy beams at him. Wilbur nods towards the door. "C'mon, then, we've got guests."

Tommy makes a face. "Ugh, don't remind me," he mumbles, letting Wilbur lead the way downstairs. As they walk into the living room, The Sense sends a shiver down his spine, and Tommy doesn't have enough forewarning to stifle it. Wilbur gives him a concerned look, and Tommy waves dismissively. "Just a bit cold, Wil, m'fine."

"If you're sure," Wilbur says, turning his attention to Dream, Sapnap, and George, who are all gathered up by the fireplace, laughing at

something Kristin's said. Wilbur lets go of Tommy and starts to head towards them, and The Sense gives Tommy an indignant sort of chirp, as though it's scolding him for letting Wilbur anywhere near them. Wilbur beams. "It's great to see you guys again! How's Karl?"

The question is directed at Sapnap, who grins. "Ah, he's good, Quackity's good, we're all doing really great," he says, and Tommy blinks. Poor guy probably doesn't even know. Sapnap nods at Tommy. "Oh, hey, kid."

Dream's attention snaps away from whatever story George is telling Kristin, and he turns, standing as soon as he sees Tommy. "Tommy! How've you been?" Dream asks, stepping towards him, and The Sense fucking *screams*. Tommy gives Dream a shaky smile, and The Sense does the internal equivalent of smacking the back of his head as Dream puts a hand on his shoulder, eyes crinkled at the corners. He's smiling. "It's been way too long, it's so good to see you. Look at you! Did you get taller? I feel like you got taller."

"I don't think I have...?" Tommy says, unsure as he trails off. Dream tilts his head a little, and The Sense thrums uneasily. "It's, uh... it's great to see you too, man."

"This kid's my favorite," Dream says to Phil, who laughs. God, Tommy really doesn't want to ruin *another* dinner, but maybe he should tell Phil about how badly The Sense hates Dream's guts. Maybe. Dream gives Tommy a hearty pat on the back-Tommy has to deliberately keep his hands at his sides-and moves towards Phil, knocking a knuckle against the glass of water he's got. The Sense is going fucking crazy. "Cheers! Best as I can, anyway. The building is *fantastic*, Phil. Thanks again."

The Sense sends an unexpected flash of anger through Tommy's brain-as though with that, it's expecting him to *do* something-and Tommy inhales sharply, stumbling back a little and bumping directly into Techno. "Well, hello to you too," Techno says with a joking tone, but the concerned look in his eyes gives him away. "Almost made me drop my glass."

"Sorry," Tommy says absentmindedly, and The Sense thrums, his heart rapidly beating against his ribs. God, this is the *worst*. "I think I

need some water or something, I'm-I don't know."

Techno's brows furrow. "Yeah, okay, c'mon, let's get you some water," he says, gently setting one hand between Tommy's shoulders and nudging him towards the kitchen. When they're alone, The Sense is still there, but it's not worked up about *Techno*, it's more of an anxious sort of paranoia that he shouldn't be leaving everyone alone in the same room as Dream. Techno pours him a glass of water, and Tommy takes it, gulping as much of it down as he can. "Is this, like, a Sense thing? Or is it an anxiety thing?"

Tommy wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and laughs, albeit a bit shakily. "When is it *not* an anxiety thing?" he jokes, but Techno doesn't laugh. Tommy swallows. "It's, uh, it's a Sense thing. It's *really* not happy right now."

"What's wrong? What's bothering you?" Techno asks in a stage-whisper, staring directly at Tommy's forehead, and Tommy shoves him, laughing despite himself.

"Oh, fuck off, it's at the back of my head, not the front," he scoffs, rolling his eyes, and Techno gives him a lazy grin. Tommy's smile fades a bit. "It's Dream again. I don't know *why*. I don't-if Sapnap didn't know about it, then surely *Dream* doesn't know, o-or maybe he *does*, but then why would The Sense...? It's not *logical*, Tech, I-"

"Woah, woah, woah, slow down. Sapnap doesn't know... what?" Techno asks, and Tommy shuts his eyes in frustration. Shit. He hadn't meant to bring it up to Techno, because he doesn't want Techno to worry, it's enough that *Tubbo*'s worried about it. The last thing Tommy wants to do is rope somebody else into fretting over Guided Evolution. Techno crosses his arms. "Tommy, seriously, what is it?"

Tommy winces. "Okay, so *maybe* Tubbo and I found out that it's Mum's company heading the experiment that made me... what I am...?" he says, and Techno blinks at him. Tommy hurries to correct himself. "But she didn't know anything about it, and she said that when private investigators came to ask, *Sapnap* didn't know anything about it, s-so maybe it's just that Dream *knows* about it, but he-I mean, obviously he's not *evil*, he's nice to everybody, he's nice

to Phil a-and Wilbur and Kristin and *me!* So why won't The Sense shut the fuck up?!"

The Sense takes great offense to that. Tommy wants to tell it to go fuck itself. Techno puts his hands on Tommy's shoulders. It's grounding. "Hey, hey, it's okay. Listen, if your Sense is tellin' you that someone's not trustworthy, we oughta listen to it, right? It's never been wrong before--"

"No, no, it *has* been, Tech, it's so *stupid*, it trusted *Quackity*," Tommy insists, and Techno gives him a really sad look. Tommy's brows furrow. "What? What is it? The fuck are you giving me that face for?"

"Tommy, is this... is this a Sense thing or is it a broken mirror thing?" Techno asks, carefully, deliberately, like he's trying not to hurt Tommy's feelings or some shit.

But what the fuck does *that* mean? "What are you on about?" he asks, blinking, and Techno takes a deep breath.

"Is this your Sense or is it *you*? I'm only asking because it seems like you're a little... on edge. I don't mean that like it's a bad thing," Techno amends quickly, "but maybe The Sense is going haywire because *you're* going haywire. You kept beatin' yourself up for trustin' Quackity, and now you're saying the same thing about The Sense. You're going through a lot right now, and you're angry and scared, and that's perfectly alright, but... let's take a step back, okay?"

"Fine," Tommy says, "yeah, okay, talk me through it, help me out here."

Techno nods, refilling Tommy's glass of water. "Okay, so what do we know? We know that Dream and Sapnap and George are nice people, right? I mean, they're, uh, they're kind of jerks sometimes, but for the most part, they've been nice, they hired Phil, they work with Kristin-they haven't done anything bad as far as we know," Techno says, and Tommy nods, taking a sip of water. "I mean, the first time they came to dinner, The Sense went off, but nothing ever happened, right?"

"Right," Tommy says, "that's-yeah."

"So, logically, there's nothin' to be scared of," Techno tells him, but The Sense still thrums uneasily at the back of Tommy's mind. There's something wrong. Or, he supposes, The Sense thinks something is wrong. Techno puts a hand on his shoulder. "And besides, no one's going to do anything in our house, and if they do, you and I are right here."

Tommy swallows. "You're right. You're right, I'm sorry. I don't-there's nothing wrong, they're perfectly nice people, I-I don't know why I'm..." he trails off, dragging a hand over his face in frustration. God, he feels so stupid.

"Don't apologize," Techno tells him. "I still trust your Sense, I'm not saying it's *wrong*, but I just don't want you to panic over this. Nothing's going to happen, Tommy, and if anything *does*, I'm right here with you. You should trust your Sense, it's usually right, but I think it might be amplifyin' the bad things and the paranoia you're already feeling."

"I know, I'm just-God, it feels like *so much*," Tommy says, and The Sense gives him a sheepish little chirp, like it's apologizing for having been so overbearing. "I'm glad for it, really, I am, it's saved my ass so many times, but... I just need it to be there, I don't need to get like *this*."

Techno gives his shoulder a squeeze. "You're gonna be fine, Tommy. I'm right here, Phil's right here, it's gonna be just fine. You take a minute to calm yourself, we'll go back out whenever you're ready, okay?" he hums, and Tommy takes a deep breath as he nods. Techno gives him a minute, lets Tommy sip his water and calm himself before he asks a new question. "Alright, you wanna tell me why exactly you're focusin' on this instance specifically?"

Glancing away, Tommy gnaws at his bottom lip. "It's just... when I wasn't doing anything about whatever it is that was bothering The Sense, it... it tried to make me *angry*," he says, and Techno's brows furrow in confusion. Tommy sighs. "Like, The Sense tried to do the whole *fear* thing, but instead of the fear, it was-it was anger."

Because lately, whenever Tommy's gotten angry, he's *done* something about it. He supposes that that's not very surprising, all things considered. He's gotten to know anger very well over the course of his life. He's gotten pissed at his brothers, at his parents, hell, even at his *friends* sometimes, even before being Spider-Man. Granted, it's a little magnified now, considering everything that's happened, but he's always had anger, always been able to get angry and fix whatever had made him mad in the first place.

But he's never been as afraid as he is now.

He's never had to stare death in the face every damn day before. He's never had to deal with distrusting and fearing the people he loves, never had to question himself, his justifications, what he's seeing and feeling. Tommy's never felt this much fucking terror before in his life, so naturally, he has no idea what the fuck to do about it.

In a way, Tommy supposes it's perfectly logical from The Sense to shift from giving him a sense of panic to giving him a sense of anger, because he actually *does* things when he's mad. It doesn't mean he has to like it. The Sense pokes at the back of his skull tentatively. *I wish you wouldn't piss me off so often*, Tommy thinks, as if it can hear him-fuck it, for all he knows, maybe it can-and The Sense pulses. *Could you just... I dunno, keep to the fear thing?*

The Sense says nothing. That's not unexpected.

Tommy sighs. Techno gives him an odd look. "Well, what've you got against being angry?" he asks, and Tommy scoffs in disbelief. Techno doesn't seem sarcastic or anything, though.

"Techno, the last time I got angry, I shattered a fucking mirror. I put a goddamn crack in the dining room table. I completely blew up at you and Will!" Tommy says, and Techno quickly shushes him, glancing nervously back at the doorway. Thankfully, no one seems to be curious about the commotion. Tommy flexes his hands by his sides and clenches his jaw. "I don't *want* to get angry, Techno, I don't want to get *violent*."

Techno gives him a sad look-okay, now Tommy's just fucking

annoyed at that, he doesn't need to be fucking babied. "You're not a violent person, Tommy, you haven't-I wouldn't say that you got *violent*, you're just... you're just havin' a hard time finding an outlet for your anger, right?" he asks, and Tommy nods, albeit a little begrudgingly. Techno gives his arm a reassuring squeeze, and Tommy tries to smile, if only to stop Techno from looking so worried. "We're gonna have dinner soon, are you gonna be okay? I can try and think of somethin' to tell them just in case you don't wanna eat dinner down here."

"No, no, it'll just get worse if I'm not-if I can't be there in case something happens," Tommy mutters, and he sighs, setting the glass of water aside. "I'm good. I'm fine. Let's just... let's get this over with."

This easily beats out the last dinner they'd had with Dream, Sapnap, and George for the world's most awkward fucking encounter the Watson household has ever seen.

Tommy is positively miserable, stewing in both Sense-driven anxiety and the anxiety his scrambled brain is already prone to. Techno is sitting by his side, carefully grounding him to the moment occasionally when it seems like Tommy's brain is letting him drift a little *too* far away from where they currently are. Tommy can't imagine Techno's too happy to be on babysitting duty tonight, but he's given up on trying to pretend as though nothing's wrong with him.

After all, why should *Tommy* have to suppress everything? Why *shouldn't* he be scared? If The Sense is making him uneasy around Dream-no matter what Techno says, discarding the fact that Dream's never been anything but nice to him-Tommy's going to trust it. The Sense hasn't led him astray before, save for the whole not-warning-him-about-Quackity thing, so Tommy's going to trust his instincts.

The Sense chirps happily at that, and Tommy has to hide his small smile behind his glass of water. Wilbur's talking about something, rambling on, really, but Dream is looking at Tommy. The Sense is

less happy about that little development, so Tommy tries really hard to keep his focus on Wilbur's story, even if he keeps zoning out.

"So, you're telling me you started a *cult* on a playground when you were ten?" George asks skeptically, and Sapnap cackles, smacking the table lightly.

Phil sighs. "He did. I had to deal with *so* many angry parents," he says, and Wilbur grins, completely unashamed. Tommy picks at the greens on his plate, and Phil waves a hand in Wilbur's direction. "What did you say you were doing with it again?"

"Our mission statement was that we'd start a commune right there and then on the playground, and I would be in charge of who got to use which structures," Wilbur says proudly, and Tommy snorts.

Techno hums. "I remember that. I had to explain what a commune was to a bunch of six year olds," he recalls, and Wilbur beams, willfully ignorant to Phil's fond sighing. Techno grins at Wilbur and points his fork in Wil's direction. "I was your reluctant partner in crime so many times, man."

Kristin rolls her eyes fondly. "God, don't remind me. Not to mention you got this one in on it too," she teases, ruffling Tommy's hair.

"Was I in on it? I don't remember that," Tommy huffs. It's good that they've pulled him into the conversation; now he can have something to focus on. Tommy frowns thoughtfully. "Then again, I must've been, like... two? Three?"

"You were two, and you were a *menace*," Wilbur tells him, scrunching his nose up, like he's remembering a two-year-old Tommy and being all fond about it. "I swear, it's like you cried until you learned how to talk, and then you never shut the fuck up."

Tommy laughs. "You know, I can't believe I used to trail after you all the time, you were just as much of a menace as I was," he says, and Wilbur puts his hands up, a joking admission of guilt.

"You both were-and still are-incredibly chaotic children," Phil tells them, and Tommy and Wilbur give him matching menacing smiles.

Phil shakes his head in mock exasperation.

"I don't remember a lot of what I was like when I was really little, but I know I took way more naps than the average kid," George says thoughtfully. He turns to Sapnap, a shit-eating grin on his face. "I bet you got yourself into all kinds of shit."

Scoffing, Sapnap shoves him. "Uh, I'll have you know I was an *angel*," he says, and Dream raises a single brow at him.

Tommy shudders.

"What were you like as a kid, Dream?" Kristin asks, all good intentions, but The Sense flares up at the flash of *something* that goes across what little Tommy can see of Dream's face at the question.

Dream leans back in his chair a little, seemingly lost in thought. "Y'know, I don't really know. I mean, I got in trouble a lot, I remember that much," he says with a laugh that doesn't sound all that humorous. Dream's eyes snap to Tommy, and he's fairly certain that if The Sense were a person, it would be forcibly dragging him out of the room right now. "I'd like to think I was a good kid. A good brother. Not really sure, though."

"And why's that?" Tommy asks, mouth too fast for his brain to catch up to.

Dream looks a little surprised at the interjection-Techno gives Tommy a wary look-but the corners of his eyes crinkle up at the question nonetheless. "Well, I, uh, didn't really get to see my little brothers all too often, y'know? I wanted to be a good brother, just... never got the chance, I suppose," he says easily.

Wilbur, ever the charmer, tries very hard to dissolve the newfound tension with a joke. "Well, be glad you didn't get to see the shitty side of it, I guess! Silver linings and all that," he jokes, and Tommy tries to laugh along, as does Techno, but Dream only raises a brow at Wilbur. Tommy winces as Wilbur immediately flounders. "Oh, uh, I just meant-little brothers can be a pain in the ass sometimes, but you gotta love 'em!"

Tommy would be tempted to *actually* laugh at Wilbur's awkwardness if it weren't for how weirdly intense Dream's being right now. Sapnap and George seem a bit perturbed by it too. "I'm a little jealous, if I'm completely honest," Dream says coolly. The Sense doesn't like this. Hell, *Tommy* doesn't like this. "You've got a great couple of brothers here, Wil. I know if I had a little brother as smart and fiery as Tommy, I'd be *glad*. I'd be *grateful*."

"Oh, I-I wasn't saying I'm not--"

"I know," Dream says easily, "just a little food for thought."

Well.

This is uncomfortable.

Tommy claps his hands together and ignores The Sense practically screaming at him to stop being the center of attention. "Who wants dessert?" he asks, slightly strained, and Phil looks over to him, brows furrowed. Tommy looks to Sapnap and George, a nervous smile on his face to mirror their own. "Fellas, whaddaya say? Dessert? More wine?"

"I'll help you," Kristin offers, and Tommy feels incredibly relieved at that, leading the way into the kitchen and taking a deep breath as soon as they're out of the room. Kristin nudges his side lightly. "Well, *that* was a little weird."

"No kidding," Tommy huffs, and Kristin sighs. "Kristin... can I ask you a question?"

"Go for it," she says absentmindedly, grabbing a tray of store-bought pastries from the fridge.

"Do you trust Dream?" Tommy asks, and Kristin blinks in surprise.

She lets out a little laugh-not at his expense, but out of surprise-and she nods. "Well, yeah, I kinda *have* to trust my boss, don't I?" she jokes, and Tommy nods, focusing on his shoes. Kristin steps closer, a hand on his arm. "Why? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, it's fine, I just... I dunno. I've felt off this whole night, is all,"

he says, and it's not *entirely* untrue. The Sense is more at ease, but it's still thrumming with anxiety at the idea of having left Dream alone with everyone in the dining room. Tommy gives Kristin as big of a smile as he can muster, taking the tray from her. "Let's get back out there, yeah?"

"Sure," Kristin says, sounding a little distracted.

Tommy heads back into the dining room, overdramatically presenting the tray and taking a bow as Techno sardonically claps for him. "Thank you, thank you, I'll be here all night," he says, grinning, and Phil gives him a discreet thumbs-up.

"You know what? I'm kinda warming up to you, kid," Sapnap says, and George snorts, raising his eyebrows skeptically. Sapnap shoves him. "Dude, he brought *food*."

"Your loyalty is too easily won," George tells him flatly, only for the two of them to burst out laughing. Dream shakes his head somewhat fondly.

Tommy settles back into his seat next to Techno and grabs one of the pastries for himself. One of the blander ones, of course, he doesn't want to be overwhelmed even more. "You handled that pretty well," Techno mumbles, and Tommy grins.

"Of course I did," Tommy huffs, "I'm incredible."

"Whatever you say," Techno tells him, rolling his eyes. "I'm just glad we don't have to hear any more of Wilbur's stories."

"Uh, fuck you, Techno, my stories are *incredible*," Wilbur says with no bite, grinning like an idiot. "Who wants to hear the one about the time me and Tommy teamed up to beat Techno in a fight?"

"Oh, *please*, that was unfair, all you did was keep talkin' to distract me 'til Tommy could tackle me," Techno huffs, and Tommy snickers. Techno pokes at Tommy's side, glaring playfully at him. "What are *you* laughing at, mud boy?"

"Enough with the mud story!" Tommy huffs. "You already told them *once*, dickhead!"

“Uh, I didn’t, Wilbur did-”

“I did tell them, it was very entertaining-”

“I will kick *both* of your asses, I don’t give a *fuck*-”

“Watch your language at the dinner table, Tommy, we’ve got guests over-”

“You say this as if they haven’t already heard him swear like a sailor, Techno-”

“That’s true-”

“I can’t fucking stand either of you,” Tommy says, grinning, and Wilbur flips him off with just as big a smile. Techno gives him a deadpan set of finger-guns, and Tommy shoves him. “Pricks, the lot of you.”

“See, *this* is what I miss about having brothers,” Dream says loftily, leaning his chin on one hand, and The Sense *really* doesn’t like that for whatever reason.

Wilbur gives Dream a polite smile. “Yeah, I guess it’s not too bad,” he says, and Tommy really wants The Sense to stop making his head pound now.

Techno shrugs. “I could do without it,” he says, and Tommy yanks on the end of his braid. That gets him a glare. “Okay, *fine*, maybe I enjoy having brothers too. Occasionally.”

Tommy grins.

“You’re probably wondering why I’ve gathered you all for a Spider Squad meeting today,” Tommy says, hands clasped together as he stands before Phil, Techno, and Tubbo in the living room, already suited up, save for his mask. Wilbur and Kristin are out for the day-Wil’s at Sally’s and Kristin’s working over weekends since they’re so short-handed-so Tommy’s got free reign to use his powers wherever he’d like. He’d given Phil a good scare when he’d walked into the

kitchen on the ceiling earlier this morning. Right! Back to it. "I would like to go to therapy."

Phil blinks at him in surprise, and Techno and Tubbo exchange a wary look. "Mate, you're already *in* therapy, though," Phil says, visibly confused, and Tommy frowns. He definitely should've elaborated, then.

"I *meant* I want to go to therapy as Spider-Man," he says, feeling rather proud of himself. "I know what you're probably thinking-'Oh, but Tommy, you are already so cool and amazing, and your personal growth over the past few months never fails to astonish us, surely you do not need *more* therapy'-but hear me out."

Techno puts his fist up by his mouth and squints. "So... you're gonna tell Bad your identity?" he asks, and Tubbo just sighs.

Tommy scoffs and shakes his head. "Obviously *not*. I can't do that," he says, waving dismissively, and Phil pinches the bridge of his nose in between his fingers. Tommy puts his hands out placatingly. "Don't *worry*, I've got it all figured out! If I can find out where to find a very *discreet* therapist, I can get help for the Spider-Man side of things as well as-well, you get it."

Standing and putting one hand on Tommy's shoulder, Tubbo looks at him, scans his eyes over Tommy's face. "You," he says, "are a moron."

Well. Tommy takes offense to that. "I think what Tubbo's *trying* to say," Phil supplies, "is that you should really make sure that you're getting advice and support for the parts of your, uh, identities that overlap, y'know?"

"See, but I've already thought of that, Phil," Tommy says, swatting Tubbo's hand away and stepping back a bit to address all three of them. "It's basic math! I get help for *Tommy* from Bad, and I get help for *Spider-Man* from someone else, and then I just add them together! I can just figure out the stuff in the middle on my own!"

"That's an extraordinarily bad idea," Techno says flatly. Tommy throws his hands up in the air in exasperation. Honestly, what do

they expect him to do?! Techno seems to sense exactly what he's thinking, because he glares at Tommy like the answer is obvious. "You need to tell Bad that you're Spider-Man. Don't jump through a bunch of hoops to try and keep it a secret from the one guy who, arguably, should probably have been the first to know."

"While I disagree with that last part," Phil says pointedly, and Techno gives him a sheepish smile, "Techno's right. You should just tell Bad about it, mate. He knows you now, you don't want to have to start all over with someone new, do you?"

Tommy groans. "You're not *getting it*," he huffs, and Tubbo rolls his eyes. "Oh, fuck off, Big T, I'm just trying to keep him safe!"

"Why are you holding onto the secret so tightly? What supervillain is going to potentially learn your secret identity and think 'Ah, yes, let me hold his therapist hostage' first thing?!" Tubbo asks, bewildered, and Tommy narrows his eyes.

"Enough people are already in danger because of me, I don't want to add another potential casualty to the list," Tommy says, sharp and angry, and Tubbo's demeanor softens into something sad. Phil starts to say something-probably to comfort him-and Tommy shakes his head. "No, it's true. If any of those fuckers discovers who I am, you're all primary targets, and that's on *me*. Which is something I would be able to talk about with a therapist *without* endangering them. If they don't know who I am, then my identity can't be used against them."

Techno still looks frustrated, but he says nothing. Phil doesn't argue further either. They're probably just as tired of this conversation as Tommy is. "Alright," Phil says finally, "how much cash am I taking out?"

Blinking in surprise, Tommy stutters out something incoherent, then shakes his head, collecting himself. "Uh. Yeah. So, I found, like, a couple good therapists that specialize in trauma, but I'm not sure which one I would really click with...? Like, it's fuckin' lucky that Bad and I got on so well, I might need to do a couple of sessions before I really *know*, y'know?" he rambles, and the three of them just stare at him.

"All of this research, and you could just... tell Bad who you are," Techno says in total disbelief, and Tommy glares at him.

"Nothing is ever simple when you're Spider-Man, bitch," Tommy informs him, and Tubbo snorts. Tommy's posture shifts a little; he doesn't want to *not* take this seriously, but it's so much *easier* to avoid talking about his feelings by joking around. "I know it's fuckin' convoluted as all hell, but I just-this is what *I'm* comfortable doing. At least I'm getting help, right? At least I'm doing *something*, right?"

Phil gives him a reassuring smile. "Yeah, mate, we're proud of you for that," he says easily, and Tommy beams at him. "Just let me know what you need and when you need it. I'll tell Kristin you're getting more sessions, since that's technically not a lie. We've got your back, Toms."

Tubbo nods. "Yeah, send me the list of therapists you found, I'll run background checks, see what their views on Spider-Man are, stuff like that," he offers, and Tommy gives him a soft smile. Tubbo makes a face. "Can't exactly have you going to a fuckin' tory for emotional support."

"Yeah. Let me know if you ever need a ride back if the cops are bein' especially bad," Techno says, and while Tommy appreciates that, he's a little hesitant. Techno waves dismissively. "I'll use Phil's car, don't worry."

Tommy feels warm. Cozy, even. This is nice.

"Thanks," he says, and he means it. "I think I wanna start trying them out after patrol today, if that's okay...?"

Phil gives him a hearty pat on the back. "Of course it is. Let me see how much cash I have, and worst case, I'll have Tubbo tell me where to meet you," he says.

Tubbo puts his hands in the air and whoops. "Another successful Spider Squad meeting!" he cheers, and Tommy rolls his eyes fondly.

It's time to get therapized.

Tommy is running out of options.

The first therapist he'd tried to book an appointment with had immediately asked for an autograph. Tommy's not one to fan-shame, but that's not exactly the level of professionalism and discretion he's looking for. The second had practically chased him out of their office-a Schlatt supporter, but not vocally enough to be caught by Tubbo's cyber-investigating-and the third had stopped mid-session to try and get a picture with him. The office he'd just left in a huff belongs to a woman who had just suggested that Tommy try exercise in order to release stress.

What the fuck does she consider *exercise*?

Tommy gets plenty of that, thank you very much.

Well, there's always... *that* option.

Tommy doesn't think he's *that* desperate yet, but then again, he doesn't exactly want to have to explain that, no, he *can't* give away his identity, and *yes*, he can pay in cash, and what do you *mean* you don't accept cash, what the hell-

All of this to say, Tommy finds himself shifting foot-to-foot in front of the building that both Bad and Puffy's offices are in. He's got a different hoodie on, along with his coat-nobody can see his masked face so long as he faces away from the street-and with some long pants, he's virtually unrecognizable.

Puffy specializes in trauma.

Tommy knows that.

She specializes in trauma, which means she can *help* him. And without her knowing that it's *him*, logically, that should make her an unbiased party, right? So, really, this is a *good* idea. That way, he keeps Bad safe, and he keeps Puffy safe as well. Bad's got a ton of degrees, so he's got focuses in a lot of areas, but Puffy's solely dedicated to being a trauma therapist, so surely, she can help. This is definitely for the best. Tommy can heal both sides of his identity separately, and then take it upon himself to heal the parts that

overlap. It'll be great!

"Hive, can I ask a favor before you log off?" Tommy asks, keeping his voice down, and Tubbo hums idly on the other end of the receiver. They've done this song and dance four times now; Tubbo logs off while Tommy's in the session-if they even get to that point-and he calls back when Tommy gives Shroud's head two taps. "Could you... do something to disguise my voice?"

"Uh, sure, bossman. I'm on it," Tubbo says, sounding a little skeptical, but he taps a few times on his keyboard anyway. *"Alright, try it out."*

"Testing...? Testing-woah! I sound *different*," Tommy says, laughing a little at how absurd this voice sounds coming out of his mouth. Well, technically, it's coming out of his *mask*, but the point still stands. His voice is a little warbled, more static-sounding, and Tubbo had pitched it down just a bit. "Right! Thanks, man."

"Talk to you later, Spidey," Tubbo says, and Tommy can practically hear the shit-eating grin that's probably on his face.

With that, Tubbo disconnects, and Tommy makes his way into the building, hands tucked into his coat pockets. He whistles to himself, slightly surprised to see someone in the waiting room, and he gives them a quick wink. Their eyes go wide, but before they can pull out their phone, Tommy's already ducking down the hallway and strolling straight over to Puffy's office.

He knocks once, and there's a brief moment where he worries he might be interrupting one of her sessions-though Tubbo had assured him he wouldn't be, said she doesn't have another one until much later-but Puffy opens the door before Tommy can start to spiral. Her face does a weird jump from annoyance to surprise to shock and horror to worry.

"Spider-Man?" she asks, blinking, and Tommy nods.

"Could I come in?" he asks, tilting his head. He hopes he doesn't seem rude. "If you're busy, I understand, but I was hoping you take walk-ins...? You're, um... you're a trauma therapist, right? I've been

looking for one of those.”

“I-yeah, of course, come in, come in,” Puffy says, and she holds the door open for him. She gestures to one of the plush armchairs, and Tommy sits, glancing around her office, rather amused. It’s very... Puffy. There’s a lot of decorations-Tommy can even pick out some art framed on the wall that him and Tubbo had made when they were little kids-and the entire room feels like home. Tommy’s completely at ease here. Puffy, on the other hand, seems incredibly frazzled. “So you-let me get this right. *You* were looking for a therapist-”

“A *trauma* therapist,” Tommy corrects, because he’d done his fucking research, and he wants that to be *known*, Puffy.

Puffy nods. “Right, yes, a trauma therapist, which I am. And you... came to *me*?” she asks, slightly skeptical.

Tommy waves his hand in an ‘eh’ sort of motion. “Well, to be fair, I *did* try, like, four other therapists first, but none of ‘em worked out,” he says, and Puffy runs a hand through her hair, clearly overwhelmed. At that, Tommy’s shoulders shift up by his ears. “Uh, if-I totally get it if this is, like, too much, I-I can find someone else to go to, I’m sure-”

“Oh, no, that’s not it at all, I’m just trying to wrap my mind around the fact that a superhero is asking me to be his therapist,” Puffy says, and Tommy blinks up at her. That’s fair. It’s not exactly a common occurrence, after all. Puffy sits down in the chair across from him and grabs her clipboard-it’s the one Tommy had gotten her for Christmas-and she takes a deep breath, brows furrowed in concentration. “Right. Let’s do this.”

Tommy lets out a surprised laugh. “Yeah?” he asks, a little taken aback, and Puffy grins at him.

“Hell yeah,” she says, and Tommy can’t help but to mirror her grin. She taps her pen on the edge of her clipboard. “So... I’m assuming you can’t give me any personal details, but we should start with introductions. I’m Puffy. What d’you want me to call you? Anything you prefer other than Spider-Man?”

"Uh, Spider-Man is fine. Or Spidey. That's what my friends call me. And my enemies," he adds, and Puffy looks rather concerned at that. Tommy laughs to himself. "Well, there's also Arachnid, 'that fucking asshole,' Spider-Fuck, little spider, fuckface-Schlatt actually called me Spider-Fraud once on the news, it was kinda funny-and then there's webhead, sticky fingers, a bunch of stuff like that. Very formulaic, honestly, they really oughta come up with something more original."

Puffy is quiet for a moment, then she jots something down on her clipboard. "Spidey it is," she says with a smile once she's done writing, and Tommy snorts. Puffy regards him with a scrutinizing gaze, like she's already looking for answers. There's the Puffy he knows; she's always been so good at picking apart emotions, getting to the root of the problem. It had been a real annoyance growing up when he'd tried to avoid getting in trouble for shit that he'd most definitely done, but it's quite useful in this situation. "Go ahead and start with what's been bothering you the most lately."

Tommy lets out a low whistle. "That's a difficult question to answer, innit? I mean, do I start with the homicidal maniacs or do I start with the trauma-driven panic attacks?" he jokes, but it lands *very* badly. Puffy looks incredibly concerned. Tommy waves dismissively. "Ah, ignore me, I like to cope with humor. My civilian therapist says that it's 'not healthy' to brush everything off as a joke, but I think he just lacks my incredible sense of humor."

Puffy slumps back in her chair. "Wow, you are... just *really* not okay," she says, sounding absolutely stunned, and Tommy nods.

"Oh, yeah, no, my mental health is in shambles," he says lightly, almost like it's yet another joke. "But hey, could be worse! I could be *dead*, but I'm not! Little surprised by that, honestly, I get shot *very* often."

"Okay, let's-can we slow down for a minute? Take it bit by bit?" she asks, and Tommy nods. "If I'm understanding this correctly, you're *aware* of how bad your mental health is? And you have a civilian therapist?"

Tommy scoffs. "Well, yeah, but obviously he doesn't know the whole

story. Like, he knows about my problems, but not *my* problems,” he says, gesturing towards the mask, and Puffy squints at him, like she’s trying to discern something. “If you’re gonna ask why I haven’t just told *him* my identity-well, I mean, people that I care about that know my identity have already gotten hurt, can’t exactly have that happen to *more* people.”

Puffy straightens up, pen at the ready. “And how many people know your secret identity at the moment?” she asks, and Tommy gives her a skeptical look. It must translate on the mask, because she hurries to elaborate. “I’m only asking to get an understanding of your current support system. Everything we discuss here is completely confidential. If you need me to do *anything* for your piece of mind, you let me know. Whatever accommodations you need, I’m happy to provide them.”

“Oh, no, that’s-yeah, it’s cool. Long as you’re not, like, *recording* me or something,” he says, and Puffy looks at him like she’s horrified at the mere suggestion. That’s actually kind of comforting. Tommy clears his throat. “Right, so... three people know. My dad, my brother, and my best friend.”

Those are generic enough descriptions. Tommy’s happy with that answer. Puffy nods and writes that down. “How would you describe your relationships with them?” she asks, and Tommy’s brows furrow. “Generally positive? Negative? How has being Spider-Man affected your interactions with them?”

Tommy fumbles to find an answer, but he doesn’t really know what to say. “Sorry, I just-give me a second, I’ve gotta get my-I’m trying to piece an answer together. I guess I thought we’d just be talking about the whole... villain thing,” he says, and Puffy nods patiently. “So, um. I guess me and my dad are good. He’s-we’re pretty close. I mean, he didn’t find out until really recently, so there’s-it’s a little bit of tension there. And then with my brother-he was the first to find out-he and I haven’t been close in ages, but we’re doing better now. And my best friend was pretty pissed initially, probably because he expected that I’d sooner spill secrets to him than to my brother-which was true at the time, but now I’m not sure-but we’re good now. He’s worried about me, though, obviously. They all are.”

Puffy writes for a while, then taps her pen on the edge of the clipboard a few times. "And how do you feel about that worry?" she asks. "Do you get annoyed by it? Is it helpful? Are you glad that they're worried, or does it feel more like an inconvenience? A bit of both?"

Jesus, she's right on the fucking money, isn't she? "Yeah, a bit of both," he agrees, and she nods, writing something else down. "I mean, I get *why*, y'know? Logically speaking, it's kinda batshit to know that someone you care about is getting shot or stabbed or crushed by buildings, but I feel like-it's like they don't get how *I* feel about it."

"And how *do* you feel about it?" she asks, head tilted slightly.

Tommy takes a minute. He wants to really consider that question, really examine it. He hasn't let himself have the chance before; he's always been preoccupied with trying to seem fine, so in a space where it's okay *not* to be, *truly* okay not to be, he doesn't really know what to do with himself. "Um... it's a lot of pressure," he says, honestly, for the first time in ages. "I mean, the entire fucking *city* is relying on me. Nobody else can do what I do-and I-I don't mean that to sound like I'm all full of myself or some shit, it's just-that's just how it is."

"Can you elaborate a little more on that?" Puffy asks, and Tommy nods.

"I mean, it's kinda... if *I'm* not protecting the city, no one else will. And I feel like I'm the reason it's in danger in the first place, so *that's* on my conscience," he says, and Puffy scribbles something on the clipboard again. Tommy's leg starts to bounce, and he moves to start biting his nails, only to realize that he can't, given his gloves. "It's sort of like this big... weight. Like, when I think about how many people are *relying* on me, how many people *need* me, a-and that they all need me to be *okay*, it feels... well, the best way I can describe it is that it's the same sort of sensation as getting my ribs crushed by Slime. Y'know, big green dude with the symbiote?"

Puffy winces sympathetically. "Yeah, I've heard of him," she says, and Tommy chuckles. She taps her pen on the clipboard again idly.

“Are there any particular experiences with villains that you wanted to talk about today?”

At that, Tommy wracks his brain, and immediately zeroes in on Quackity. But he can't really talk about fighting Quackity without disclosing personal details, which would make this whole thing pointless. So he tries to think of something else, and he remembers the crushing weight of concrete on top of him. He remembers being drenched in Phil's blood. He remembers vomiting up spores in an alleyway.

“I-I remember wondering what my last words to everyone might have been,” Tommy admits quietly. Puffy's expression shifts to something somber. “When Automata... when he dropped the building on me, there was this split second when I was-I saw it coming down, and right before it made impact, I thought to myself, ‘What's the last thing I said to my mum?’”

Puffy is quiet for a moment, save for the scratching of pen on paper. “Is... is that something you have to think about often?” she asks, and Tommy goes pale.

Come to think of it...

Yeah.

“I, um, I try not to dwell on it too much. But I've been trying to tell the people I love that I love them more often, just in case. And I keep thinking about how I've ended conversations with people, how I've left them off,” he admits, and Puffy's brows furrow, but she nods, writing something else down. “I mean, that's just the risk of the job. Obviously, almost dying really put that shit into perspective, but... I have to be ready. I have to go into each patrol knowing that it could be my last, I have to be okay with the fact that every fight comes with that risk.”

Puffy outstretches a hand, then hesitates. “You know, you don't *have* to be okay with it. You can recognize the risk, sure, but that doesn't mean you can't be scared or even *angry* at the fact that there are people out there that want to hurt you,” she says, and Tommy sighs.

"I *know* that, but... I can't keep getting upset about it. If I did, I wouldn't be able to do what I do, I couldn't fight as efficiently as I do. The risk is *there*, I know it's there, and I have to be okay with the possibility, because if I'm *not*, then that could fuck me up during a fight and put me even *more* at risk," he explains, and Puffy jots something down. Tommy's bottom lip trembles, and he casts his gaze to the floor. "I almost gave up then. When I was trapped under the building."

Puffy is quiet-there's not even the sound of her writing-and Tommy shifts in his seat. "What do you mean by that?" Puffy asks, and Tommy stiffens a little.

He's never told anyone about this-not Techno, not Phil, not even Tubbo. "There was... there was a second, before the people that were watching started yelling out. I was in so much *pain*, a-and I was... I think I was ready to die. To give up," he says, and Puffy inhales sharply. "I can't remember if-no, I'm pretty sure-you don't feel yourself healing, right? But I *do*. A part of my powers is that I regenerate really quickly, a-and... there's not even *words*. Feeling my bones try to fix themselves, feeling my muscles stitching back together, *feeling* blood multiply-it's fucking *torture*. I remember wondering... I kept asking myself why my body was healing when my brain was so ready to let go. And then-well, then I saw my brother in the crowd, and I knew I couldn't die just yet."

"Yet?" Puffy asks in a quiet, horrified voice.

"Well, yeah. I always get back up. That's what I keep telling him, anyway," Tommy says, picking at a stray thread on the armchair. "I couldn't let him watch me die, y'know? So I got back up."

"Oh, honey," Puffy says, so very sad, "that's not healthy."

Tommy blinks, looking back up at her. "What?" he asks, slightly dumbfounded, because of *course* it's healthy, he's just looking out for Techno, he's just trying to make sure Techno doesn't worry, and surely trying to make other people happy is *healthy*.

Puffy's brows knit together. "I want you to-if you can-relive that moment for me. Describe what you were feeling as you were feeling

it under all that concrete,” she tells him, and Tommy starts to bounce his leg again.

“Um. I was-the first thing I felt was pain,” he says, feeling a little silly. Puffy nods encouragingly, and Tommy takes a deep breath. He thinks back to what it had been like on that day, in that briefest of moments. “Then, I was... it was shock. A little bit of it. Like I didn’t- couldn’t believe it was happening. And then, when I realized that I was going to die, I was scared and... and I was relieved.”

The words leave his mouth without his permission, and his breath hitches.

Relief.

That’s what it had been.

Puffy’s hand is warm over his own, even through the gloves of his suit. “Then what did you feel?” she asks, voice as gentle as her touch, and Tommy’s bottom lip starts to tremble.

“I felt guilty,” he whispers. “I saw my brother and I felt guilty.”

“You’re in pain,” Puffy tells him, “and you want that pain to stop. Is that right?”

“I want it to stop,” Tommy says, finally, *finally*, and the dam breaks. Tears spill down his cheeks, and his shoulders shake as he sobs. “I want it to stop *so badly*, Puffy.”

“It’s okay if you’re not okay,” Puffy tells him. “In here, you don’t need to be strong. You can cry and scream and rage at the universe all you want. In here, you can be as upset and terrified as you need to be. You will *never* be judged, you hear me? Never.”

“I’m not okay,” Tommy sobs. Then he laughs through his tears. “I’m not okay!”

It feels *so good* to admit that and *mean* it.

It feels good to not have it be a punchline or a bit.

It feels good to not feel bad about it.

Puffy gently nudges a pack of tissues towards him and pointedly turns around. Tommy mumbles a quick thanks and pulls his mask up to wipe at his tears. "Take as long as you need to cry," Puffy tells him, and Tommy's thankful for that. "Let me know when you're ready."

Tommy takes a few deep breaths-does some of Bad's breathing exercises, ironically enough-and he wipes away the last of the tears and snot from his face. He pulls his mask back down and sniffs. "A-Alright, you can turn back around," he says, and Puffy does. "Thank you for... all of this. I'm sorry I'm such a mess."

"I'd be *way* more concerned if you weren't," Puffy tells him, smiling sadly, and Tommy snorts. It feels odd to be talking with her without her knowing it's *him*, but this is easily the best therapy session he's had as Spider-Man. Puffy tilts her head. "You know, you don't have to apologize for crying during a therapy session. I know it might feel like you should, but like I said, there's no judgement here. I cry all the time. Just last night, I cried at a video of a baby otter because it was really tiny. No other reason."

Tommy lets out a surprised laugh. "That'll do it," he says, and Puffy grins, going to say something else before her phone starts ringing. She turns to it, then turns back to Tommy, looking apologetic. He waves dismissively. "No worries, go ahead. I've got to get going soon anyway, but, um... I hope that we can keep having these sessions...? Here, let me pay you-"

"Oh, you really don't have to, you do enough for the city already-"

"Please, I've got cash and everything, it's really no problem-"

"No, no, honestly-"

"Puffy, I *will* web this into your hand-"

"Alright, alright," she says with a laugh, and Tommy hands her what he hopes is an appropriate amount of money. He doesn't know whether or not her rates are the same as Bad's, but judging by the

widening of her eyes, it's either way too much or not nearly enough.
"This is-"

"For you," Tommy finishes for her. "Thank you for your help."

Puffy squares her shoulders, though her eye twitches slightly as her phone starts to ring again, and Tommy wonders what's got her so worked up. "Same time next week?" she asks, and Tommy nods, beaming.

"See you then," he says, and he heads over to the window, giving her a two-fingered salute before hopping out into the alley next to the building. He shuts the window, but he hesitates a little ways down the alley as he hears her raised voice.

She must be *really* upset. "I told you to stop calling!" she hisses, and Tommy walks back towards the window, keeping his back to the wall. Yeah, maybe he's being a little nosy, but sue him, if something's wrong with Puffy, he wants to help. "No, you *can't*, I-you can't keep *doing* this-I don't give a shit! I don't! You come *near* my family-no! No, no, I won't-I'm not letting that happen! *Damn it!*"

There's some muffled commotion, then silence. Tommy stays by the window. If there's something seriously wrong, The Sense will let him know. "What the fuck is going on?" he whispers, and there's some shuffling from inside the office.

Puffy sniffs, then clears her throat. "Phil? Yeah. It's me. I-no, no, nothing like that, everything's okay, I just... I need you to promise me something, okay?" she asks, and Tommy wonders what the fuck *Phil* has to do with this. "Just-no, Phil, just *listen*, if... if anything happens to me, you take my boys and you keep them safe, okay? If I-no, no, I'm not-I *can't* tell you-Phil, just *promise me* you'll take them in if something happens!" There's a brief pause, then Puffy lets out a sigh of relief. "Thank you. Yes, I'm-no, Phil, I'm fine, I just-yeah. Thanks."

Tommy's eyes are wide, his heart racing.

What the fuck is going on?

Bit of a longer chapter for y'all today, which is why it took a bit longer than usual, hope you enjoyed!

Art list:

[This art](#) is based off of ch42 and is absolutely heart-wrenching ;-;

[This art](#) showing The Sense going off is super cool!!

[This interpretation of Tommy's suit](#) is also ridiculously awesome :D

[This design of Automata](#) makes me go absolutely feral omg

[This really cool design](#) of Spider-Tommy

[These sketches](#) have super dynamic poses, and the design is so cool!!

[These sketches](#) are cute as hell :D

[This absolutely incredible piece](#) blows my mind every time I look at it

[This sketch of Spider-Innit](#) is so cute, he has little knee pads!!

[This](#) absolutely phenomenal design of Spider-Innit, it lives in my brain rent-free, go check it out!!

[These](#) adorable doodles :D

[This](#) amazing watercolor piece!

[This insanely cool art](#) that looks straight out of a comic book!

[This design](#) for Tommy is awesome :D

[This](#) Spider-Innit design is so good!

[This doodle](#) of Spider-Innit is really cute!! The pose is really dynamic :D

[This absolutely incredible sheet](#) for a Spider-Tommy design, I love the little notes!

[This mock-up poster](#) is insanely cool!!! It's got all the villains in the background with Tommy in an *awesome* dynamic pose in the front :D

[These amazing sketches](#) of Spider-Tommy!! Super expressive and dynamic :)

[This wonderful art](#) of the mirror scene from ch53!

[This](#) really funny sketch of a "Oh my God, he's dead?! No!" hypothetical

[This amazing poster](#) that Teriyakiparrot made!! Seriously super cool, lives rent free in my brain :)

Very sorry if I've missed anyone's art or forgotten to put someone in the art list, I'm running on about two hours of sleep and three cups of coffee at the moment! Sometimes Tumblr also forgets to give me a notification if anyone's tagged me, and sometimes posts under the guided evolution tag get yonked into the void for whatever reason. If you ever post something that's not on the list/if I haven't seen it, leave a link to it in a comment so I can add it! The absolutely incredible artists that have made art for this fic deserve so much love!!!

shame, shame, SHAME!

Chapter 55: shame, shame, SHAME!

Tommy fights Automata and gets therapized. Again.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Tommy is not having a good time today.

It feels as though lately, he's not been having a very good time in general, but today's brand of hell is *specifically* not good.

He skids back on the asphalt, arms scraped up and breathing ragged. "Listen, as much as I love this game of cat and mouse," he spits bitterly, glaring daggers at Automata, "I *really* think you should leave."

Automata tilts his head as he raises ten jagged pieces of metal, almost amused. "Oh? And why's that?" he asks, tone teasing and almost patronizing as he tosses the metal at Tommy with ease, barely breaking a sweat. Tommy dodges them, ducking and weaving, and Automata hums something. It's unnerving.

"Trust me, you're gonna wanna leave before you *really* piss me off," Tommy tells him, and he taps his wrists together. The blades on the sides of his hands slide out, and Automata looks vaguely surprised at that. "If you don't fuck off, I'm gonna stop holding back."

Instead of saying something like, 'You've been holding back?! Oh no!' Automata leans forward, and The Sense thrums uneasily. "That's what I'm hoping to see," Automata says, sounding positively fascinated, and Tommy leaps forward, throwing punches faster than Automata can block them. The blades slice through Automata's coat

and come away with flecks of blood, spattering on the pavement. Automata stumbles back, sweeping a finger over one of his cuts and tilting his head as he raises a hand. He sends a jagged piece of metal flying at Tommy, and it looks as if it's going to miss, but a small, stinging cut is carved into Tommy's shoulder. "I show you mine, you show me yours."

Okay, what the *fuck* does that mean?!

Automata makes a grab for him, and Tommy flips back, leaping atop a streetlamp. He doesn't want to let Automata get *near* him. Fucking creep. Automata wrenches the streetlamp up, and Tommy dives off of it, tackling Automata into the ground. The television screen cracks slightly, and the picture on it glitches a bit. The Sense makes the hair on the back of Tommy's neck stand up, and he grabs the flying piece of debris as it comes at him, slamming it into the side of Automata's boxy television head. The picture on the screen glitches more, and Tommy grabs the front of Automata's coat with one hand.

Then, a piece of metal piping comes flying at him.

Tommy catches it, of course, but the second he looks at it, it feels as though his entire demeanor shifts. The fury that suddenly floods him is unexpected and not entirely unwelcome. Automata has some fucking nerve. Before Tommy can think, before he can even register what he's doing, he takes the metal piping and bashes in the other side of Automata's television head.

Automata scrambles, trying to shove him off, but Tommy won't let go of his coat, even as he desperately tries to crawl back, to throw more debris at him, only to have it batted away by the fucking metal pipe. "Are you *scared*?" Tommy sneers, deadly quiet. "You scared of a little metal, bitch boy? Go on, rip it out of my hand, then! Take it! You *can't*!"

To punctuate his sentence, Tommy slams the jagged end of the piping into Automata's shoulder and watches as a red stain starts to bloom and sluggishly seep out into the fabric of Automata's coat. His brain short-circuits for a moment, and Automata takes the opportunity to grab something from an inside pocket of his coat and slam it over Tommy's face.

Tommy snaps out of his dazed state at that, knocking it away, but the damage has already been done. He can feel the terror starting to fill his lungs, his brain, his very being, and as he makes a mad grab for Automata, he stumbles. Automata dashes away, still clutching his shoulder, and Tommy staggers his way into an alley, trying very hard to take huge gulps of fresh air.

As the world starts to swirl around him, and the corners of a black void start to fuzz his vision, Tommy whimpers, clutching at the sides of his head. *Not again. Not **again**.*

He can't do this again.

*You brought this on yourself. You're so angry all the time now. What the fuck is **wrong** with you?! You could have **killed** him. Do you want that?! Is that what you want?! You want them to hurt, you want them to **hurt**, so badly, so **badly**, just as badly as they hurt you. That's what you want, isn't it? You could have that. You could lose control. Lose control, Tommy.*

Lose control.

No. He won't. *And why not?* It wouldn't be right. *Why's that? What excuses are you making now?* He refuses to kill anyone. He can't have that on his conscience. *What about the people you've failed to save? Surely **those** people count for something. Selfish. So selfish. If you had just **killed** them already, gotten rid of the villains, then no one would be in danger. Oh, but you just can't **stand** the thought of killing someone, right?*

Tommy looks up into the inky blackness of the void and sees it. Sees that fucking place again, sees the rubble and the pipe sticking out and the red-

"That was your fault, you know," Phil's voice says from somewhere behind him, and Tommy feels his body moving closer to the rubble without his permission. Phil's laying there, cold and dead, but that's not right, he hadn't died, this isn't *real*.

A hand grabs his shoulder. It's Wilbur's. *"You killed Dad, and you didn't even have the decency to tell me who you really are,"* he says,

but it's not him, it can't be him. Tommy shakes his head, voice dying in his throat as Wilbur's face twists into a sick grin. *"And you're really wondering why I want to leave you behind? I'm so fucking **tired** of catering to your little temper tantrums, y'know."*

"No, no, no, no, no," Tommy mutters, stuttering over the letters, "Wilbur wouldn't say that, Wilbur would *never* say that, he wouldn't-"

"Wouldn't I?" Wilbur jeers, and suddenly he feels too tall, looks too tall, too overbearing, too inhuman to be Tommy's big brother. *"Do you even **know** me anymore, Tommy? Don't you ever wonder what you've been missing?"*

Sally materializes next to Wilbur, but there's something off. Her hair is all wrong. Hadn't she dyed it? And Wilbur hasn't worn that jumper in ages. Tommy could've sworn he'd thrown it out. Sally doesn't look like that. *Wilbur* doesn't look like that. *"Wow, he really **doesn't** know you anymore. He can't even remember what we look like,"* she says, giggling, and her and Wilbur both start shifting, their appearances getting so fuzzy that Tommy can't make either of them out anymore.

He reaches out, only to be met with thin air. Where is he? It's dark. He *hates* the dark. Someone is out there, their laugh echoing around him. The crackle of static and lightning roars in Tommy's ears, and he whirls every which way, trying to find the source of it. *"You're always going to be afraid of me, Tommy,"* Quackity says from a million different directions, and Tommy clamps his hands over his ears. It does nothing to muffle the noise. *"Look at you! You're **cowering**. I haven't even **done** anything yet! You haven't seen me in **months**, and I'm still the first thing on your mind! Did my betrayal really fuck you up **that** bad?"*

A slimy green hand wraps around Tommy's middle, and he struggles, gasping as Charlie squeezes the life out of his ribs. *"Kind of pathetic, when you think about it,"* Charlie says, voice distorted, like there's someone else talking on top of him. *"Your worst fear is ending up like a monster. Like **me**. Am I a **monster** to you, Tommy?"*

Tommy is abruptly dropped, and he coughs and sputters, clutching at his ribs. His hands and knees are damp. The water below him

reflects nothing but himself and the empty black void around him. "Well, well, well," his reflection says, a sickening smile on his face that certainly doesn't belong to him, *"we meet again. Scared of me, aren't you? You keep looking at me and expecting to see yourself, but all you can see is a stranger. Such a funny thing, reflections are."*

Stumbling to stand, Tommy finds himself in a circle of mirrors. They alternate between his alter ego and himself. Like even the fucking hallucination can't make heads or tails of who he is. *"It's so **hard for you**, isn't it? They just don't understand,"* one of the Spider-Men says, and Tommy hesitantly reaches out to touch the surface of the mirror, only for it to shatter at his feet.

"There he goes again," Techno's unimpressed drawl comes from somewhere in the void, and Tommy just wants this all to fucking stop already. *"Oh? You want this to stop? That's funny. If you want to know what **I** think-since you seem to want my approval so **badly**, Tommy-I think you should've given up back then under all that concrete."*

There's a cackle from behind him-like Tubbo's laugh, but malicious. *"God, do you even know how **annoying** it was to have to babysit you? All you are is a burden. I can't believe you're making us constantly worry over you. So **selfish**,"* Tubbo hisses, suddenly standing over him with what can only be described as a swarm of Shrouds surrounding him. The Shrouds abruptly stop moving and turn to point their little guns at Tommy. *"I'm almost disappointed you haven't gotten yourself killed yet. Making all this trouble for me, the least you can do is get it over with. Stop **prolonging** things, Tommy."*

The Shrouds start to shoot at him, and as Tommy starts to duck, he falls. He keeps falling until he lands face-first into the middle of a street with solid black where the sky should be. *"Oh, how **fun**,"* a voice says, and Tommy can't pinpoint who it belongs to this time. He scrambles to stand, looking around. The street is empty. *"You've done it! You've pushed **everyone** away."*

"Please," Tommy begs, "let me go, I-I don't wanna see this, please, please!"

Two pairs of hands on his shoulders yank him back, and Tommy topples to the ground. Phil and Quackity loom over him, nothing but disdain on their faces. *"You're such a **hypocrite**,"* Phil says as a red stain starts to spread over his torso. *"You cried and whined when it happened to me, but you've just gone and tried to do it to someone else!"*

Quackity leans down, a menacing grin on his face. *"Nah, man, don't listen! Let your anger take over! Get violent! It's the only way to **really** solve your problems, isn't it? Don't you wanna be **just like me**, Tommy?"* he asks, sickeningly nice, and Tommy shakes his head frantically.

*"He's **scared** of himself. It's pathetic,"* Tubbo says from behind him, and Tommy turns to face him, heart quickening when he realizes that they're on top of a brick building. Phil and Quackity are nowhere to be seen. Tubbo steps towards the edge of the building, and Tommy starts to sprint for him, jumping right off as Tubbo starts to fall, hands outstretched but never quite reaching. Tubbo smiles contentedly. *"I mean, I always knew you were gonna be the one to get me killed, but I can't help but wonder **how**, y'know? Am I gonna fall?"*

There's a sickening crack as Tubbo hits the ground, and Tommy falls through him, into the void, down onto another street. Blaze is there, drones at the ready and aimed at Tubbo. "No," Tommy pleads. "Anything, *anything*, please, I can't-!"

"Will I be shot?" Tubbo asks, and Tommy squeezes his eyes shut as the void lights up with gunfire, hands clamped over his ears. When he opens his eyes again, they're back on a rooftop, the city of London below them, but it's technicolor, it's *wrong*, and Tommy's hands are balled into fists in the fabric of Tubbo's shirt. There's blood dripping from Tubbo's mouth and nose, bruises all around his eyes and his cheeks, cuts above his brows and on his chin and over the bridge of his nose. He grins at Tommy. He's missing a tooth. *"Or are you gonna lose control and just kill me yourself?"*

Tommy wants to let go of him, but he can't. They're too high up. He doesn't want to drop Tubbo. "I-I'm not-that's not-it's not *possible*, Tubbo, I-I wouldn't, I'd *never*-"

There's a ringing in his ears, and Tubbo grabs him by the collar too, the collar of his fancy shirt-why's he so dressed up?-and it's the same glassy look in his eyes that Ranboo had at the party and in the hospital that one time. *"Wouldn't you? Haven't you already hurt us enough?"* he sneers, and Tommy pulls him onto the roof, shoving him away. Tubbo's head tilts slowly, at too great of an angle. *"What were you expecting? A happy ending? After **everything** you've done?"*

"What a joke," Ranboo says, and Tommy turns to see him holding a megaphone. *"I stood **up** for you, man. And what do you do? Lie. You never **stop** lying to me."*

"You should really be ashamed of yourself," Tubbo chimes in, and Tommy tries to web away, to a different technicolor rooftop, but he can't, nothing's coming out of his wrists, he's *powerless*, he can't do anything. Tubbo laughs. *"Wow! The second you don't have your powers, you really **are** helpless, aren't you?"*

*"You're **nothing** without me,"* his own voice snarls, and Tommy turns on his heel to face himself. There's no technicolor city, no empty street, no strange pools of water. It's just him and Spider-Man. *"Where would you be without me? Still trailing after Wilbur, still begging for Techno's approval? Just another nobody. You're **nobody**. No one **cares** about us. Well, nobody cares about the **you** half of us, anyway. But me? Ranboo sticks his neck out on the line for me. So does Tubbo. Phil's only worried about you because you're **me**. Techno only liked you after **I** showed up. You **need** me."*

Tommy steps back. "That's not true," he stammers out, eyes wide. Spider-Man tilts his head, and Tommy feels a flash of anger rush through him. "It's not! Fuck you!"

*"Why are you mad at **me**? I'm just telling you the truth,"* Spider-Man says, a laugh lacing his voice, *Tommy's* laugh.

"Fuck you! You ruined me!"

*"I made you **better**. Everyone likes you **better** this way."*

"No they don't! You're a liar!"

"So are you."

"I'm not! I'm not-I haven't lied-!"

*"Then what do you call **me**?! A secret identity is a fucking **secret**, and you keep digging yourself a pit of lies to keep it!"*

"I'm not a bad person!"

"Are you sure about that? Because apparently half of London disagrees."

"I'm not!"

*"Fucking look around you, man! People **hate** us!"*

"Which is it?! Do they hate me and love you, or do they just hate me?!"

"You know the answer to that."

*"No, I **don't**! And I'm tired of it! I'm tired of **you**!"*

"It's not my fault you're a bad person!"

"I'm not! I'm not a bad person!"

*"Yes, you **are**! You're horrible to everyone around you! You lash out and you don't apologize properly, you never take responsibility for the selfish things you've done!"*

"I do! I try my best-!"

*"Your best isn't **good** enough!"*

"That's not my fault-"

*"You're not even **trying** your best! You're holding back!"*

"Because I don't want to kill anyone!"

"That's selfish! It's for the greater good!"

"It's not! It's not worth it if I'm getting hurt even worse along the way!"

*"How could you **say** that?! You're a horrible person!"*

"Well if that's the case, I don't want to be me anymore!"

His voice echoes across the void.

There is nothing in front of him but a mirror.

Tommy looks tired.

Tommy does not look like himself.

"Not even a 'hello?' You must be really upset," Bad says, and Tommy wrings his hands together, leg bouncing as he shuffles in his seat. Bad tilts his head slightly. "I'd ask you if everything's okay, but the answer to that is... well, it's pretty obvious. Do you want to talk about-"

"Am I a bad person?" Tommy blurts, and Bad is visibly taken aback by the question. Tommy leans forward, brows furrowed as he blinks rapidly, trying very hard not to cry. "Bad, if I'm-you need to tell me if I'm a bad person, because I-I really think I am, and I can't-I need someone to be honest with me, if I'm a bad person, I don't *want* to be, I don't even fucking *recognize* myself anymore, I... I'm so *scared*."

There's a familiar stinging feeling at the corners of his eyes, and Tommy looks away, biting at his nails. "Tommy, you're not a bad person," Bad tells him, and Tommy just keeps hearing his own voice screaming at him, telling him how horrible he is, telling him that he's a monster. Bad offers him some tissues and hands him a bottle of water. "Good people do bad things sometimes, sure, just like bad people do good things, but our actions are only part of what defines us. Just the fact that you're worrying about whether or not you're a bad person shows that you *care*. You don't *want* to be a bad person, and that already puts you ten steps ahead of any bad person that does bad things and doesn't care about it, right?"

Tommy nods. He supposes that's fair. "I just... I can't even tell if the things I'm doing are good o-or bad, or a mix of the two, and that *scares* me," he says, and Bad writes something down.

"Do you, uh... wanna tell me what brought all this on? Because I hate to say this, but I can't really help here unless I have context," Bad says, and Tommy lets out a weak laugh.

"Right. Sorry. Kinda went zero to a hundred right out the gate there, didn't I?" he chuckles, taking a sip of the water. He sniffs and sets it down again. "Hard to, um... it's hard to pinpoint exactly where it started."

That's a lie.

He'd scared himself.

Bad gives him an easy smile. "That's okay. Take all the time you need. You can talk through it or think through it," he says, "whatever you gotta do."

The metal pipe had felt heavy in his hand.

It had felt powerful.

Meaningful.

"I hurt someone," Tommy says, finally, "I hurt someone very badly and it felt... good."

Bad seems frozen in place. "Wh-I-sorry, what?" he says, and Tommy nods, gnawing nervously at his bottom lip. Bad starts writing something down quickly. "What happened? Do your parents know about this? Was this at school?"

"It wasn't at school. And my dad knows," he says, because it technically isn't a lie. He'd gotten home to Techno and Phil fussing over him with the news still playing in the background. Tommy had connected the dots. "So you don't have to worry about the whole... mandatory reporting thing if you don't want to. I mean, obviously, you probably have to tell him that I brought it up in therapy, but he knows about it. It won't be awkward."

Bad nods. "Yeah, I'll... I'll have to bring that up to him after our session today. When you say... when you say that it felt 'good,' what do you mean by that?" he asks, and Tommy winces.

"Okay, maybe 'good' isn't the right word for it. Cathartic...? Yeah. That fits better. He's been... he's given me shit for a while now. He really hurt me. And when I finally got the upper hand, I-I remembered... I couldn't *stop* remembering what he did," Tommy says, shuddering, and Bad starts writing again. "And then I..."

Bashed his face in?

No, that's not accurate. He'd bashed the side of a box television in.

Stabbed his shoulder?

More accurate, but also more concerning without the appropriate context.

"You hurt him?" Bad asks, and Tommy wonders how he can say it without judgement. Without the concern and horror that Tommy's been accustomed to hearing with questions like that. Bad says it not clinically, not coldly, but he says it in the kind of way where it's as if he just wants clarification. Tommy gives him a sheepish nod. Bad hums. "Is there anything else I should know about the situation before we keep going?"

Tommy takes another sip of water. "I mean... not really," he says. "What more is there to say? He hurt me, I hurt him, it scared the fuck out of me."

"Okay, well... from what I know," Bad starts, and Tommy braces himself for the worst, "it seems like you did it in self-defense. And there's nothing wrong with that. It *does* concern me that you... you said it felt cathartic, right? Why did that scare you?"

At that, Tommy hesitates. "Pretty fuckin' obvious, innit? You're not supposed to *like* hurting people. Not unless you're a bad person," he says, and Bad's brows furrow. "I guess I just sort of... it felt like it was finally *fair*, y'know? But that's probably just... it's in my head. It could *never* be a fair fight."

That's true, somewhat. The fact that his muscles are constantly tensed to keep his strength in check is a testament to that.

"It's perfectly natural to want things to feel fair, especially if they've *been* feeling unfair for a long time," Bad tells him. "You feeling relieved or even *good* about getting a decent hit in is nothing to be scared or worried about. Obviously, I don't want to encourage you to be violent and I'm not *condoning* it, but a reaction like that isn't a sign of anything. If it becomes a pattern, then sure, we have something to worry about, but you're not a bad person because of this, Tommy."

Tommy blinks. "Oh. I-I guess I was overreacting," he says with a bit of a laugh, and Bad gives him a worried sort of look. Tommy grimaces. "I've, uh... I've been doing a lot of that lately."

Bad tilts his head. "What d'you mean by that?" he asks, and Tommy groans. Bad gives him an amused sort of smile and rolls his eyes. "I know, I know, you gotta talk about your *feelings*, how *horrible* that must be."

Tommy laughs a little. "No, I just... I've been getting so... upset. Over, like, nothing! I mean, my brothers told me they were gonna move out-Wil's already packing his shit up for fuck's sakes-and I flipped out! A-And when my dad was worried about me, rightfully so, I got so... so *annoyed*, and I snapped at him," Tommy says. "I keep going back and forth, my emotions are just-they're all over the place, Bad, I don't *want* to feel like this, but it's like I can't control it."

Tommy neglects to mention the whole... horrific crisis over potentially turning out like Automata and Slime bit, but he feels like that sums it up well enough.

Bad frowns thoughtfully, writing something down, then scratching it out, and then writing some more. "Have you... have you considered medication?" he asks, and Tommy blinks in surprise, shaking his head. "If you want a professional diagnosis, we can do that, and I can get you a recommendation for an evaluation so that medication can be an option. And while it's not *mandatory*, I think a prescription could really help you."

"Wh-Bad, I don't need meds, I-I'm fine, I'm handling it," Tommy says. "Obviously there's nothing *wrong* with medication, I'm sure it's very helpful, but I don't-I don't know."

"It's totally up to you, and I'm not going to try to pressure you into any decisions. It can be really difficult and frustrating to find the medication that's right for you. It can be the first thing you try or the very last or somewhere in between, and nothing is ever a guaranteed fix. But just know that it's something that helps a lot of people, and it's an option. It's up to you whether you want to take that option, but it's very important to me that you know it's there," Bad says, and Tommy gives him a sad sort of smile.

"I know," he says. Even if he'd wanted to, he wouldn't be able to. Not without risking his identity. There's no way in hell any normal prescription would be enough to make it past his metabolism. At least he can get a joke out of it, though. "Trust me, there's no medication strong enough to fix whatever the hell is wrong with me."

Bad's writing stops, and he gives Tommy an exasperated look. "Tommy. Please," he says, and Tommy gives him a shit-eating grin. Bad's mock-annoyance slips away, and he smiles. "You are *easily* the weirdest patient I've ever had."

"And you're the weirdest therapist I've ever had," Tommy shoots back, leaning back in his seat as Bad glares playfully at him.

"I'm the *only* therapist you've ever had," he shoots back, and Tommy raises his brows skeptically.

Technically untrue.

But he's not about to let that secret slip.

Tommy's mental health? Deteriorating. His identity crisis?
Worsening. Hotel? Trivago.

Art list:

[This art](#) is based off of ch42 and is absolutely heart-wrenching ;-;

[This art](#) showing The Sense going off is super cool!!

[This interpretation of Tommy's suit](#) is also ridiculously awesome :D

[This design of Automata](#) makes me go absolutely feral omg

[This really cool design](#) of Spider-Tommy

[These sketches](#) have super dynamic poses, and the design is so cool!!

[These sketches](#) are cute as hell :D

[This absolutely incredible piece](#) blows my mind every time I look at it

[This sketch of Spider-Innit](#) is so cute, he has little knee pads!!

[This](#) absolutely phenomenal design of Spider-Innit, it lives in my brain rent-free, go check it out!!

[These](#) adorable doodles :D

[This](#) amazing watercolor piece!

[This insanely cool art](#) that looks straight out of a comic book!

[This design](#) for Tommy is awesome :D

[This](#) Spider-Innit design is so good!

[This doodle](#) of Spider-Innit is really cute!! The pose is really dynamic :D

[This absolutely incredible sheet](#) for a Spider-Tommy design, I love the little notes!

[This mock-up poster](#) is insanely cool!! It's got all the villains in the background with Tommy in an *awesome* dynamic pose in the front :D

[These amazing sketches](#) of Spider-Tommy!! Super expressive and dynamic :)

[This wonderful art](#) of the mirror scene from ch53!

[This](#) really funny sketch of a “Oh my God, he’s dead?! No!” hypothetical

[This amazing poster](#) that Teriyakiparrot made!! Seriously super cool, lives rent free in my brain :)

[This](#) incredibly cool Automata design!!

[This amazing design](#) for Tommy’s suit!!

home, sweet home

Chapter 56: home, sweet home

Wilbur time!

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Wilbur sets the last of the glasses in the cupboard and claps his hands together victoriously.

“Whooh! Last of the dishes have been put away!” he cheers, and Sally glances back over her shoulder from where she’s moving the couch to give him a fond eye roll. Wilbur gives her a cheesy wink. “On to the last of the bedroom stuff, now, yeah?”

“Don’t be gross,” Sally says, making a face, “it’s just our sheets and shit.”

There’s a loud meow at Wilbur’s feet, and he groans, stooping down to grab the tiny orange kitten at his feet. “I still can’t believe you convinced me to bring him home,” Wilbur huffs, and Sally bats her lashes at him in faux-innocence. The kitten hisses at him, even though *he’s* the one who’d wanted to be picked up, and Wilbur scowls at him as he winds around Wilbur’s shoulders, purring even as he continues to hiss. “He’s such a fucking-”

“Watch it,” Sally warns him playfully. She strides over to scratch behind the kitten’s ears, smiling gently. The hissing stops. Wilbur narrows his eyes at the kitten. Traitor. Sally pokes Wilbur’s nose with her finger and smiles. “That’s our son you’re talking about, asshole.”

“Ah, yes,” Wilbur says flatly, “he has your eyes.”

Sally glares at him, then scoops the kitten off of his shoulders. He meows at her and bats his paws at her face adorably. Wilbur huffs. "He needs a *name*, Wil," she hums, and Wilbur raises a brow at her. They can just call him an assortment of names, like 'dickhead,' or 'tiny piece of shit,' but as if she can tell exactly what he's thinking, Sally gently swats at his arm. "We're not gonna swear at him every time we call him over. I'm thinking we call him 'Fundy,' since he's also a ginger that's always grumpy."

"Over my dead body," Wilbur scoffs, and Sally scrunches her nose up playfully. He heads over to the last of the boxes by the bedroom and starts shuffling through them. "Uh, okay, so I bought these new sheets, they're pretty nice, but did you-"

"Wilbur, if you put cotton pillowcases on our pillows, I might actually fucking throttle you," she says immediately, and Wilbur grins, holding up the unwrapped packaging of the brand new sheets he'd gotten. Sally points an accusatory finger at him. "You are putting my silk sheets on the bed or so help me *God*. You're not gonna fuck up my hair, *and* it's better for your skin as well."

Wilbur relents, setting the cotton sheets back in the box and picking up Sally's. "Holy *shit*, these are soft," he says, eyes wide, and Sally nods proudly, setting the kitten down on the floor. "Right, are you gonna help me make the bed, or am I gonna have to do it myself?"

"Fancy yourself a homemaker, Wil?" Sally teases, easily carrying the boxes into the bedroom and setting them down in the closet. Wilbur sets the sheets down in a lump on the bare mattress, much to Sally's chagrin. "You are *immensely* lucky that I'm fond of you."

"You don't have to tell *me* twice," Wilbur says, grabbing her waist and pulling her close, and Sally wraps her arms around his neck, an easy smile on her face. The flat is quiet, save for the sounds coming from the street below, and Wilbur shifts in place.

"Everything okay?" Sally asks, brows furrowed, and Wilbur nods, still feeling off. It's not as if he isn't excited-hell, he's *very* excited to *finally* be living independently-but there's a weird feeling in his chest. Sally tilts her head, smiling sadly at him. "You miss them?"

Ah. That's what that is. Wilbur nods. "Yeah. It's weird to think that I can't just... go down the hall to see them anymore," he says, and Sally hums. Wilbur squeezes her sides gently. "Don't get me wrong, it's not as if I'm not fucking *thrilled*, because I am, I'm very happy to be here with you."

Sally sighs contentedly and leans into him, resting her head on his shoulder. "I know. I'm happy to be here with you too," she tells him. "It's fine if you're homesick, y'know. Nothing wrong with missing your family."

It's not even just that. Wilbur misses everyone, sure. It'll be strange not to offer Kristin a cup of coffee in the mornings or lend a hand to Phil in the garden. It'll feel odd to strum his guitar without Techno's sarcastic commentary or Tommy's eager suggestions. But Wilbur feels like he'd left things unfinished, which is something he hates as a *concept*, let alone having actually done it. It feels like there's something he'd missed, something he hadn't taken care of.

He doesn't know what it is, and that *bothers* him.

It'll probably keep bothering him until he figures it out.

But right now, he's with Sally in their brand new flat, their first place together, a place all their own-well, it technically belongs to a landlord, but that's beside the point-and he doesn't want to drag down the mood with this. Of course, the mood is also not helped by a certain *someone* that keeps meowing to be let up.

"I think our 'son' wants your attention," Wilbur tells her flatly, and her laugh vibrates against his chest. Sally does pull away, though, and she shoos the kitten out of the room, shutting the door and effectively keeping him out. Wilbur raises his brows at her. "What'd you go and do that for?"

"I don't want him getting in the way when we're making the bed," Sally says easily, and Wilbur glares at the door in annoyance as the kitten starts to yowl. Sally starts to spread out the fitted sheet and gives Wilbur a pointed look. "It's a king bed, Wil, my arms aren't *that* long."

“Right! Right, my bad,” Wilbur says, hurrying to help her with the sheets. They slowly but surely make the bed, and Wilbur’s pretty happy with the end result. He’s also fairly happy with the fact that the cat’s stopped screaming to be let in. The bed looks crisp, which is the best way for a bed to look, in his opinion. Like it’s straight out of a magazine, or perhaps a freshly made-up hotel room. “I’d consider this a job well done.”

“And I would consider moving the end tables just a *bit* to the left, but that’s just me,” Sally says, and Wilbur beams at her, doing just as she says.

She’s right. They look better this way.

Wilbur flops down on his side of the bed. The excitement of finally being done unpacking is dwindling down now; he kind of wishes there were just a few more boxes. Then again, they’ve been doing nothing *but* unpacking, and if he so much as gets a *whiff* of cardboard, he might end up in tears.

Sally lays beside him, their fingers lacing together in the middle of the sheets. It’s peaceful. In time, Wilbur’s sure he’ll learn to enjoy the quiet. Cherish it, even. But for now, it just feels so... unsettling. He turns to look at Sally, and she turns to look at him. Her mascara is just slightly smudged, the way it always is after she’s gotten done with a run or when she’s been standing over the stove for a while.

He lifts his free hand up to gently wipe away the smudge with his thumb, and Sally closes her eyes contentedly, humming as Wilbur traces his thumb over the line of her jaw. She’s quite beautiful. Well, ‘quite’ doesn’t exactly do her justice, but in the silence of the room, in the calm of the moment, Wilbur’s passion is more of a soft press of keys than it is a symphony. It’s an ever-steady presence in his chest, not overwhelming, but always there, unwavering under everything else he’s feeling.

This, Wilbur thinks to himself, must be what domesticity feels like.

She lets her eyes flutter open, and Wilbur smiles at her softly. “Is it weird that I’m excited about this? Like, I don’t think it’s really settled in yet that this is—that it’s *real*, that we’re doing this,” he says, and

Sally brushes a lock of hair out of Wilbur's face. Wilbur laces their fingers together more purposefully and leans in so that their foreheads are pressed together. "Let me take you to dinner tonight."

"Mmh, I dunno, my boyfriend might get jealous if he knows I'm going on a date with such a good-looking guy," she teases, and Wilbur feels his cheeks flush in spite of himself.

"Oh yeah? What's this boyfriend of yours got that I don't?" he asks, leaning into the bit, and Sally giggles.

"Well, for one thing, he's an *amazing* singer," she says. "Voice of an angel, really. Plays the guitar, too."

"I bet I could serenade you," Wilbur says, "I'm melodramatic enough for that."

"I'd like to see you try," Sally says, lashes batting as she leans closer. "I'm very loyal to him."

"Always a good quality to have," Wilbur tells her. "If you were mine, I'd be the most faithful man you'd ever met."

"Are you now?" she asks, grinning, and Wilbur nods. Their noses are brushing now. Sally's lips quirk up in a smirk, and her fingers run over the length of his arm. A mere ghost of a touch, and she's already got Wilbur shivering. "In that case, I might have to take you up on your offer of dinner after all."

Wilbur bites at his bottom lip, and Sally leans in just a hair closer. Then, of course, his phone buzzes. He ignores it, cupping her cheek. His phone buzzes again. "For fuck's sakes," he mutters, giving her an apologetic look as he turns to sit up and check it.

wil

wilbur

answer your texts bitch

Scowling, Wilbur clicks his phone off and turns back to Sally. "What's up?" she asks, brows furrowed in the sort of way that makes

Wilbur want to smooth his thumbs over them. Sally tilts her head. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, it's just Tommy. It can wait," Wilbur tells her, laying back down. "Now where were we?"

"I *believe* you were about to kiss me, but I could be wrong," Sally says, and just as Wilbur starts to lean in, she swiftly moves above him and pushes his shoulders down. She grins and waggles her eyebrows. "Look at that. I win."

"You can win as many times as you'd like," Wilbur tells her, and he means it. "*I'm* certainly not complaining."

Sally leans down and pokes his nose. "Is that so?" she says, and Wilbur nods, beaming. He sets his hands on her waist and starts to lean in when his phone buzzes again. Sally stifles a laugh and pulls away to hand him his phone. "It's for you."

"I swear to fucking God, if I get one more text," Wilbur mutters, barely even looking at the phone before he sets it aside. Sally pouts at him and shifts off of him, arms crossed even as Wilbur scoffs in protest and sits up. "Wh-hey!"

Giving him a pointed look, Sally hands him his phone again. "I'm gonna have a shower. *You* are gonna talk to your family that misses you and loves you very much," she tells him, and he groans, flopping back down. Sally pokes at his sides, and Wilbur squirms. "Quit being a baby about it, Wil, and answer the damn phone."

With that, she grabs a change of clothes and heads into the bathroom, shutting and locking the door behind her. Wilbur glares up at the ceiling. His phone buzzes again. "Oh my God, *what?!'*" he huffs out as he answers, annoyed.

"*Well hello to you too,*" Techno says from the other end of the line, amused, and Wilbur wants to throttle him. "*In case you haven't noticed, Tommy sent-no, yeah, I'm callin' him, I-sorry, he's buggin' me about-oh, you're really gonna laugh at 'bugging,' huh? Anyway, Wil, please answer his texts so he stops complainin' that you aren't.*"

"I'm going to block his number is what I'm going to do," Wilbur threatens half-heartedly. "We're getting unpacked-well, we just finished, technically. How are things over there?"

He hears Techno hum. *"Weird without you here,"* he admits, and Wilbur never fails to be surprised by that honesty. It feels like Techno's emotional availability had done a total flip as of a few months ago, and Wilbur still isn't used to the openness. *"I'm sure it's quiet up there."*

Wilbur chuckles lightly. "Yeah, it's pretty quiet. London's still loud as all hell, but it's all just street noise. The one we're on isn't all too busy," he says, idly petting the kitten as it hops up onto the bed and settles in his lap. Smarmy little bastard. "... Don't tell Tommy I said this, but I kinda wish it wasn't as quiet as it is here."

"I won't," Techno says in a way that totally gives the lie away, and Wilbur rolls his eyes. *"Okay, I think Tommy's genuinely gonna kill me if I don't hand the phone ov-"*

"Wil!" Tommy shouts above a bit of a kerfuffle, and Wilbur winces, pulling the phone away from his ear momentarily. *"Wilbur! Hello! Hi! You suck and I hate you, by the way."*

Rolling his eyes, Wilbur tucks the phone between his ear and his shoulder and picks the kitten up, heading over to the kitchen. The kitten hops up on his free shoulder, and Wilbur takes hold of the phone again. "You're a nuisance," he says, fondly, and Tommy snorts. "What was it that you needed me for so badly that it just couldn't *possibly* wait?"

"I got a new jumper," Tommy says. Wilbur blinks. The kitten meows. *"I wanted to show it to you! It's got, like, a whole bunch of embroidery on it and shit, you'd really like it, man. I bought it 'cuz it reminded me of that one that you had in, like, the back of your closet that I stole-took it right out of the box while you were packing, matter of fact-and I was like, 'Huh, I should tell Wil about this,' but I realize now that it's, uh... it's not actually that important."*

Wilbur turns on the electric kettle and thinks for a moment. "It is important," he settles on saying, because he isn't really sure what

else to say. "If you think it's important, it's important. I wanna hear about that stuff, so you better keep calling, prick."

"You're the prick, prick," Tommy huffs, but Wilbur knows he's smiling. *"... I didn't mean to-if you were in the middle of something-"*

"I wasn't," Wilbur says, because really, he'd stop the world for Tommy if he asked. "And even if I was, you're still more important. Unless I'm being questioned by the police or some shit."

Tommy is quiet for a minute. *"You think I'm important,"* he says, meant to be teasing, meant to be poking fun at Wilbur for being a sap, but it sounds more like he's asking for confirmation.

"Yeah, yeah," Wilbur says, playing into it because he doesn't want Tommy to feel like he's being too vulnerable. He knows his little brother well-even if they haven't exactly been as close as he'd have liked lately-and he doesn't want Tommy to shut down the conversation. He pours himself a cup of tea. "Can't believe you stole that jumper, you dick."

"Well, deal with it, bitch, it's mine now," Tommy says, all bravado again, and Wilbur can't help the small smile that spreads across his face. *"I sent you a picture of the new jumper, by the way, and it was very expensive, so I used Techno's card-ah! I was joking, I was joking! Fuck off!"*

Then he laughs, loud and boisterous, and Wilbur grins. "Using up this month's pocket money already, are you?" he jokes, and Tommy scoffs.

"Wilbur, please, I'm smarter than that. I guilted Phil into buying it for me," he says, and Wilbur rolls his eyes. There's a silence, not uncomfortable, but it's there. Then, Tommy takes a deep breath. *"I miss you, Wil. I really do."*

Wilbur feels his heart clench. "I miss you too, Toms," he says, quiet, like it's some big secret, and Tommy laughs softly.

"Alright, well... I should give Techno his phone back," Tommy says.

"You probably should," Wilbur agrees, and Tommy hums, but he

doesn't hand the phone back or hang up. "... Tommy? Is everyth-

"You're a really good big brother, you know that?" Tommy says, and he sounds like he's about to cry, which makes *Wilbur* feel like he's about to cry. *"I know I give you a lot of shit, but I don't... I couldn't have asked for a better brother. You're a right bitch sometimes, Wil, but I love you anyway."*

"Love you too," Wilbur hums, and he hears the shower turn off. "Thanks for keeping me company all those years. And, uh, tell Techno I say thanks to him too."

"I will do no such thing," Tommy says, and Wilbur knows he will. *"... I hope your day is shit."*

"I will have the world's best day, just to spite you," Wilbur tells him.

"Bitch."

"Prick."

"Wanker."

"Dipshit."

"Fu-Techno, fuck off, I was gonna-"

Whether Tommy's hung up by accident or on purpose is beyond him, but Wilbur grins nonetheless. He's gonna miss living with those losers.

Dinner is going great.

Wilbur's having a fantastic fucking time, to be perfectly honest. Maybe he and Sally are laughing too hard for such a fancy restaurant, and maybe they're talking a *little* too loudly, but Wilbur's far too happy to give a damn. Sally steals a bit of food off of his plate, and he steals a little of her wine, beaming as he does.

"You know, if you'd have told me that I'd be having a lovely dinner

with my lovely girlfriend at a place that's *way* too expensive for the portions they serve, I'd have... well, I'd probably have believed you. I've been told I have quite a pretty face," Wilbur says, and Sally rolls her eyes fondly at him. She looks enchanting tonight. She always does, of course, but there's something about her newly red curls matching with her red dress that makes his heart pound just a little bit faster than usual.

Sally nudges his leg with her foot and winks at him. "I mean, you've other great qualities, but that face of yours certainly doesn't hurt your chances," she tells him.

Wilbur perches his chin on his hand. "Oh? And *do* tell me what these 'great qualities' of mine are," he says, and she opens her mouth to speak, only to furrow her brows and look down at the table. Wilbur, assuming that this is just part of the bit, chuckles. "Tongue-tied already, are you?"

"No, no, Wil, the wine," she says, and he looks down at it.

There are ripples.

The table isn't moving. Neither of them are touching it.

The sound of stomping footsteps starts up, far away but still far too close for Wilbur to be comfortable, and he turns around to face the big glass front of the restaurant, eyes wide in horror. There's a massive green figure hurtling towards them at an uncomfortable speed, and Wilbur stands, grabbing Sally by the arm and starting to run just as the other patrons in the restaurant begin to notice what's happening.

The big, hulking *thing*, whatever it is-Wilbur's sure he's seen it on the news before, isn't it called Slime?-crashes through the window with a roar, and everyone starts screaming, Wilbur included. Sally tugs him behind a table that's been toppled over, and they hold on to each other as the slime monster crashes and bashes its way through the restaurant.

"Okay, what's the plan?" Wilbur whispers, and Sally blinks at him.

"Fuck d'you mean, 'What's the plan?!' The plan is that we *run*," she hisses, and Wilbur nods.

"Right, dunno what I was expecting," he mumbles, and she nods. Then, their table is thrown abruptly out of the way, and Wilbur and Sally look up at Slime in utter horror. "Oh, *fuck*."

Slime hesitates, then roars at them, and they stumble back, Wilbur trying to keep himself in front of Sally. "We will *devour* everyone in this building," Slime roars, with a voice that makes Wilbur's entire body feel like it's been dunked in ice water, and Sally stifles a squeak of fear behind her hand. Slime leans down, its massive fangs in Wilbur's face, and Wilbur stumbles back. "You will be eaten if you do not start running."

"I beg your pardon?! You will not be eating *anyone* in this establishment, let alone my girlfriend!" Wilbur shouts, grabbing the nearest thing he can—a fairly decently-sized salt shaker, though he doubts that's gonna do much—and brandishing it at Slime. There's a *thwip* sort of sound somewhere nearby. Slime roars in his face, and Wilbur flinches, but they've been backed into a corner. He's got to stand his ground. "Fuck off!"

"Hey, hey! Did I miss the party?" Spider-Man's voice comes from behind Slime, and Wilbur lets out a hysterical sort of relieved laugh. Slime whirls around, and Spider-Man and Slime start to circle each other like lions. The eyes on Spider-Man's mask narrow. "C'mon, big guy, we've been through this before! You *can't* eat people."

He's talking to Slime like it's some primary schooler that's gone and stuck a crayon up their nose, rather than a terrifying monster. Wilbur still keeps an arm outstretched to make sure Sally's behind him, and Spider-Man glances over to them, eyes widening for a fraction of a second before he nods at them.

Wilbur takes hold of Sally's hand and *books it*.

Slime, of course, takes notice and starts to try to chase them, but Spider-Man starts to web up the areas all around him, forming a sort of... well, the best Wilbur can come up with on the fly is that it looks like one of those laser grids in a spy movie. Sally clammers out of a

window, and Wilbur's about to follow, but he looks back, and Slime has Spider-Man in its grip.

Ah, *fuck*.

Well, Wilbur's never been known for his impeccable decision-making.

He grabs a plate and throws it at the back of Slime's head. The plate sinks into Slime's head with a dull *thunk*, and Wilbur throws a discarded bread roll at it. The plate makes for a pretty decent target, as it would seem. "Hey! Dickhead! Over here!" he shouts, and Slime's head spins to look at him. Wilbur makes a face. "Ew."

Slime drops Spider-Man, who coughs and sputters, clambering up as Slime starts to lumber towards Wilbur. Wilbur throws an empty bottle of wine at it, only for Slime to catch it and crunch the glass to bits in its massive teeth. That's *fucked*.

Just as Slime gets close enough that Wilbur can see himself reflected in its shiny white sclera, Spider-Man comes flying in with a kick, knocking it off-course. "You should get out of here," he says, giving Wilbur what he assumes is a wary look. The words sound odd, though, it's like Spider-Man is pitching his voice down on purpose. Spider-Man turns back to Slime, arms spread wide. "There he is! Buddy, pal, Slime, my goopy amigo, can't we settle this *elsewhere-ah!*"

Slime grabs Spider-Man by the ankle and sends him flying into the wall, and Wilbur winces sympathetically. He barely has time to process that Slime's coming back his way before Spider-Man is launching himself at Slime, sitting on his shoulders and practically pummeling him with punches. Spider-Man grabs one of Slime's massive teeth and *yanks* it; Wilbur winces as it comes out and is unceremoniously tossed to the floor.

It's clear that Spider-Man has the upper hand now, and Slime throws him off, shaking its body like a dog and bounding out of the restaurant. Spider-Man follows him, and Wilbur rushes to the front of the restaurant, surprised to see Slime slip into a sewer grate. Spider-Man swears under his breath, and he starts walking back

towards the restaurant.

Presumably, Sally's also seen Slime escape, because she runs back into the restaurant. "Wil! Oh, thank *fuck*," she says breathlessly, pulling him into a hug. "That was *so* brave. And stupid. Please don't get yourself killed."

"I won't, I won't," Wilbur promises, wrapping his arms around her and squeezing tightly. He sees Spider-Man checking on the other patrons that hadn't gone very far, and he pulls away from her gently, pressing a kiss to her nose. "I'm fine, Sal, I promise."

Sally nods, and Spider-Man clears his throat, albeit a bit awkwardly. Sally turns to him and takes his hands. "Thank you! That was incredible!" she says, and Spider-Man laughs nervously.

"I'm just glad you're okay," Spider-Man says, and it really does sound like he means it. Wilbur offers him a hand, and Spider-Man shakes it. Then, he hesitates, and those big eyes on his mask are staring right at Wilbur, and Wilbur glances at Sally. Spider-Man dives forward, giving Wilbur a completely unexpected hug, and Wilbur barely has time to react before Spider-Man jumps back like he's been burned, awkwardly blinking. "Sorry, I-I don't know why I... um. I mean. Thank you. For your help. Thank you for your help, sir."

"Yeah, it's no problem," Wilbur says, a little stunned. He remembers something Tubbo had said *ages* ago, and he gives Spider-Man a gentle smile. Spider-Man's just a kid, after all. "Thanks for saving the day."

"It's what I do," Spider-Man says easily, but his voice is a little shaky.

He gives them a two-fingered salute as he swings up and away, and Wilbur watches him go, wondering what exactly about him feels so familiar.

Bit of a lighter chapter, just some lovey dovey fluff and a bit of

neopolitan bros for you today :D

Also, the art list has officially gotten too long to post in an author's notes, so I'll just be adding the art that I've gotten since the last chapter at the end of every new chapter ig dsjkfslkfjdsjfs!

[This](#) absolutely incredible artwork of the mirror scene in ch53 :D

[This](#) adorable sketch of Spider-Innit!!

[This](#) amazing art of Tommy's suit!! It's super dynamic :D

[Another incredible design](#) for Spider-Tommy!!

[This amazing art](#) of the scene from ch37!!

[This](#) super cool Automata design!!

eye of the storm

Chapter 57: eye of the storm

Tommy goes to the mall and has a talk with Phil.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Tommy's only been to this mall a handful of times in his life, and every time he's come here, he's been banned from at least one store.

But today is different! Pretty much none of the shop owners recognize him anymore from the very few times he's come here with Tubbo and Ranboo to wreak havoc-that's something that sits weirdly with him, not entirely good and not entirely bad-so he's fairly free to roam wherever their little group wants to go.

To be entirely honest, Tommy hadn't expected to go with them. Sally had come up to him after she and Wil had been over for brunch and asked if he'd like to join her, Niki, and Eret on a shopping trip. Tommy had been hesitant initially; he'd felt like it'd be a bit weird to be tagging along with a bunch of his brother's friends, but Sally had reassured him that it'd be no trouble, that she *wants* him to come.

And, of course, Wilbur had nudged him and given him a meaningful look, of which Tommy'd had no clue what it meant, but clearly, it meant *something*, so Tommy had agreed.

"Where d'you want to go first?" Sally asks him, and Tommy shrugs. Sally gives him a nervous smile and nods over at a sweets shop. "We could go in there! Get you some sweets, if you'd like."

"Nah, I don't like sweet stuff," Tommy says, "but thanks anyway."

Niki glances over and points towards a cutesy-looking shop that is incredibly pink. "Would it be okay if we went in there really quick?" she asks, and nobody has any objections, so they all filter in. Eret sifts through a rack of dresses as Niki makes her way towards cutesy decorations-Tommy assumes they're probably for her classroom, the place is decorated to hell and back and it's delightful. "Ooh, Tommy, come look! They've got stuff with moths on it!"

Tommy hurries to join her, and she shows him a little coaster with crystal moths trapped in resin. "Oh, this is *sick*," he says, lifting it up to the light to see how it refracts. There's a couple of them on the table, the moths in different colors-some of them are butterflies, but that can't be helped-and Tommy grabs the one whose moths look most like Clementine. "I've got a plush moth that looks just like this, Niki, I'm gonna have the most moth memorabilia in the *world*."

"I can get it for you if you'd like," Sally offers, and Tommy blinks in surprise.

"Oh, uh, you don't have to," he says.

"It's no problem, really," she says, and he shrugs, handing the coaster over. He's certainly not gonna complain about free shit. "Y'know, there's this really neat thrift store down by the food court, they've usually got really good shit if you guys want to go after we're done here."

She looks to Tommy, and he shrugs. "Sure," he says, and Niki nods, inspecting some pastel-colored candles. She hands one to Tommy, and he takes a whiff of it, making a face at the pungent perfumey smell of it. "Eugh, Niki, this shit is *horrible*."

"Okay, well, try this one instead, then," she says, handing him a light pink one that actually smells quite good. Tommy gives her an approving nod, and Niki grins. "I didn't think you'd like the flowery stuff more than the mint."

Tommy makes a face. "Yeah, no, peppermint is disgusting," he tells her. Sadly, he'd found out that peppermint tastes horrific after a particularly disappointing encounter with a candy cane over the holidays. Techno had been the one to break the bad news that

peppermint happens to be a plant that keeps spiders away. So many things, utterly ruined. "Anyways, you really ought to go with this one, but seriously, don't even touch the lavender one. It's gonna stink up your classroom."

Eret gives him a thoughtful frown. "I quite like lavender," they say, and Tommy snorts. They hand Tommy something-a heaping pile of sage green fabric-and Tommy raises his brows at them. "It's a jumper. Try it on."

"Am I even allowed to do that here?" Tommy asks. The shop is rather small, and there's not a fitting room in sight, and Tommy would *really* rather not get banned from yet another shop in this mall.

Rolling their eyes, Eret holds it up. "It buttons up at the front," they tell him. Tommy hums and hands his jacket over to Niki and pulls the jumper on. Eret gives them a scrutinizing sort of look, then shakes their head. "Hm. Green's not your color."

"Definitely not," Niki agrees. Tommy frowns, and she squints. "It washes you out, makes your eyes look all lifeless."

"That's just how my eyes look normally," Tommy jokes, and the three of them look at him like he's grown two heads. "What? What is it?"

Sally blinks. "Are you... okay?" she asks, and Tommy nods.

Niki puts a hand on his shoulder. "Let's find you a better jumper," she says, and Tommy shrugs. He hadn't been planning on buying a jumper today, but Phil had sent him off with a literal wad of cash-Tommy had called it 'Dadza's guilt money,' but Phil hadn't found that nearly as funny as he had-so he might as well spend some of it. Niki holds up a blue one, and Sally holds up a red one. "I think the blue's better with your hair."

"Red makes him look less pale, though," Sally points out, and Tommy puts his hand over his chest in mock offense. "What d'you think, Eret?"

“Uh, do I not get a say in why you lot are dressing me up like a mannequin?” Tommy asks, one hand in the air, and Sally chuckles a bit at that.

“These clothes probably aren’t his ‘style,’” Eret says, making little air quotes with their fingers, and Tommy scowls at them. Eret raises a brow. “Am I wrong? I’ve never seen you in anything other than a hoodie.”

“Yeah, well, you’ve only seen me a handful of times, dick,” Tommy says, eyes narrowed.

But it’s true. He’s been in sweatshirts and hoodies and oversized jumpers ever since he’d started running around as Spider-Man. It’s just easier to wear those than to have to explain away a stray injury here and there. At some point, Tommy supposes he’d just gotten used to it. Then again, he’s never really been a fashionable kind of guy. T-shirts had mostly filled his wardrobe before all of this. Wilbur had tried, once, to take him shopping for good shit, but Tommy hadn’t really given a fuck about it. He’s sure he’s still got those clothes lying around somewhere, collecting dust. That makes him feel a bit bad.

Sally puts a hand on his shoulder. “Let’s get you that moth coaster, and then we’re *definitely* getting you something better to wear,” she says, and Tommy shrugs.

“Might as well,” he hums.

What’s he got to lose?

Sally pays for the coaster, just like she’d promised, and Tommy keeps his hands in his pockets as they head over to the thrift store. Niki rushes over to a rack of shirts, and Eret starts inspecting a few belts. “We probably can’t get too much-teacher’s salary and what have you-but I’d still like to get you something,” Sally tells him, and Tommy pulls out his wad of Dadza’s guilt money.

“Oh, no worries, I can cover it,” he tells her, and Niki and Eret stop their chatter to turn and stare at him. Tommy feels his face heat up with embarrassment, and he crosses his arms. “Fuck are you

looking at me like that for? S'not *my* money."

"Did you steal it?" Niki asks, bewildered, and Tommy huffs.

"No, I didn't *steal* it, Niki, my *God*, Phil gave it to me," he says, and Sally nods wisely.

"Ah. Makes sense. No wonder Wil's so spoiled," Sally says, and Eret snorts.

Tommy squints at her, but Niki's already shoving some shirts into his arms. "I think you should go with some of these," she says, and Tommy lifts the first one off the stack to inspect it. It's horrendously beige. Niki puts a hand on her hip. "If you pair it with a pop of color and some black trousers, it'll look good."

"It's rather bold of you to assume that I own anything that could be considered a 'pop of color,' Niki," Tommy tells her, and she sighs. Eret hands him a pair of dark red jeans and Tommy gives them a flat look. "I'm not wearing red fuckin' jeans. Jeans are meant to be black, grey, or blue, Eret, honestly."

"Oh, if they're gonna have you try those, wear this instead," Niki says, pulling a white jumper off the rack and handing it to him. It's got the name of a band on it that Tommy doesn't recognize, and Tommy huffs indignantly. Niki pouts. "C'mon, just try it!"

"Fine," Tommy groans, and he shoves his jacket and the rest of the shirts at Eret before marching into a fitting room. To be honest, the outfit isn't *that* bad, but it's so... nice. It's clean and it fits, and Tommy suddenly feels very uncomfortable looking at himself in the mirror.

The jumper isn't *small*, but it's definitely stretched a bit thin across Tommy's arms and his shoulders. It makes Tommy hyper-aware of his superpowered strength, and he shifts from foot to foot, rolling his shoulders and making a face at the way the fabric scratches against them. And yeah, he does look nice in the outfit-Eret had been right about the jeans, which look good with the jumper-but it feels like he shouldn't be wearing it.

He's gotten so used to seeing himself in baggy clothes that these feel wrong. They *feel* formal, even though it *looks* like an outfit he'd probably just wear to school. Not to mention that the cut of the jumper puts the scars by his collarbones on display. Tommy hates that. They're faded and so faint that they're barely there by now, but *Tommy* can see them. He *knows* they're there.

He looks even less like himself than usual.

"Are you gonna come out and show us?" Sally asks, an innocent question, a ridiculously innocent question, but Tommy still finds himself flinching at it. His nails dig into his palms as he gnaws nervously at his bottom lip. Sally knocks on the door. "Tommy? Everything okay? Can we see the outfit?"

"I-I dunno if I like it," he answers, because he's looking in the mirror and he's not seeing *Tommy's* shoulders, not *Tommy's* biceps, not *Tommy's* scars, he's seeing *Spider-Man's* shoulders, *Spider-Man's* biceps, *Spider-Man's* strength and hard-won scars.

He stumbles away from the mirror, shaking his head. He can't start thinking like that now. He's out in *public*, he can't have a breakdown. "Tommy?" Niki asks gently. "Can we see?"

Tommy swallows and wraps his arms around himself, opening up the door just a crack. "I look weird," he says, making a face, and Niki smiles at him through the crack. Tommy narrows his eyes. "Don't make fun of me."

"We're not gonna," she promises, and Tommy hesitates, nodding once before closing the door again. He looks back at the mirror, back at himself, and he musters up a smile. It feels alien, but it looks fine. It's convincing enough. Tommy takes a deep breath and opens the door all the way, raising his brows as Niki claps her hands together, delighted. "Oh, you look great!"

Eret gives him a thumbs-up, and Sally coos, pinching his cheek. "Look at you!" she says, and Tommy swats her hand away with a laugh. Sally frowns thoughtfully. "Jumper's a bit tight 'round the shoulders, but I'm pretty sure they have a couple in bigger sizes."

Tommy wraps his arms around himself again. Niki fusses over him, adjusting the collar and poking at the hems. "Try rolling up your sleeves?" she suggests, and Tommy complies, immediately regretting it once Niki's eyes go wide. "Oh my God, *Tommy!*"

Ah. He'd forgotten about the nasty gash from yesterday. It's practically healed over by now, sure, but it's still left a bit of a gnarly scar there. "I tripped," he lies. "Rock in the pavement, you know how it is. Looks worse than it actually is."

Niki gives him a wary look and exchanges a meaningful glance with Sally. "Is everything *really* okay?" Sally asks, and Tommy nods.

"I'm fine, I promise," he says. "I just tripped. Honest."

"If anything-or anyone-is bothering you, you can tell us," Eret says, and Tommy gives them an uneasy smile. He rolls his shoulders again and makes another face. Eret seems to register his discomfort, and they put a hand on his shoulder. "Why don't we come back here later? We can grab something to eat and watch a movie or something. Put this outfit on the back-burner."

"That'd be nice," Tommy says quietly.

Niki nods. "Yeah, go ahead and get changed again, we'll get you whatever you want," she promises, and Tommy smiles.

He slips back into the fitting room, closing the door behind him. As he changes out of the outfit-and *God*, how he's missed his giant hoodie-he hears hushed whispers that he doesn't really want to bother trying to overhear. Even though he could probably make out what they're all saying if he really tries, he doesn't want to. If they're pitying him, he doesn't want to hear about it. He's too tired to be angry, he just wants to have a nice time, and he hates making them all worry about him.

Even if he's a little worried about himself.

Tommy stays quiet when he rejoins the group, and he stays quiet as the lot of them walk over to the food court. Eret and Niki have taken it upon themselves to try and alleviate the tension by talking. "So,

how's the big fancy job going?" Niki asks, and Eret chuckles.

"It's going pretty well, actually," they say easily, and Niki beams up at them. "We're getting some more new projects in, finally, but there's this rumor going around... well, I can't get into specifics, but I'm *hoping* that they bring me on for a genetic engineering project. Word's gotten out that they're working on something *big*, and they're about to bring in the most crucial part of the experiment."

Ah.

Genetic engineering.

That definitely isn't associated with anything negative in Tommy's mind.

"Aw, c'mon, you can't leave me hanging like that! I need *details*, Eret, details!" Niki huffs, and Sally laughs quietly. Eret mimes zipping their lips, and Tommy snorts. Niki scowls playfully and marches off towards the frozen yogurt place, Eret following dutifully behind her.

That leaves Sally and Tommy alone in the food court. "What did you want to get to eat? I'll get you anything you want," she says, and Tommy blinks in surprise.

"You don't *have* to, I've got it," he says, and Sally frowns.

"No, no, really, I'd like to," she tells him. Tommy's confusion must show on his face, because Sally hurries to clarify. "I just-I really wanted to make sure you had a good time today. I-I feel like you might not like me, and I wanted to fix that, so I figured I could bring you along and sort of... make it up to you."

Tommy blinks. "Why on *earth* do you think I don't like you?" he asks, bewildered, and Sally winces.

"I mean, you *were* really mad at dinner when Wil and I started talking about our plans to move in together," she says, and Tommy's shoulders fall a little.

"Oh, no, Sally, that-it wasn't because of *you*, I was just... I have a

really hard time with change, that's all, a-and it was more that Wilbur was moving *out*, y'know?" he says, and Sally nods, seemingly relieved. Tommy gives her a playful punch to the arm. "I think you're great, honestly. You make Wil happy, which is all that really matters. Well, that, and you're nice to me. That's always a bonus."

Sally beams at him. "Glad to hear it," she says. She claps him on the shoulder. "Right, come on, then, let's get you some food, kid."

"God, *finally*."

Tommy is unusually nervous.

Then again, he's pretty sure that this level of nervousness is appropriate. It's not every day he asks Phil about why Puffy's getting vaguely threatening phone calls, after all.

Initially, Tommy had wanted to leave it alone. It's none of his business, after all, even if Puffy *had* called Phil. But after every single therapy session he'd had with her as Spider-Man, she's gotten call after call from what seems like the same number, and Tommy's really worried for her safety. And Tubbo's safety. And Foolish's.

In essence, the situation's fucked, and Tommy wants to get to the bottom of it.

He'd asked Tubbo about it, but Tubbo hadn't the slightest idea. So now he's going to talk to Phil, which could either backfire intensely or help him get to the root of the problem, depending on how severe the problem actually is. Tommy takes a deep breath and knocks on the door, pushing it open at the muffled 'come in!' from the other side.

"Hey, d'you have a second?" he asks, and Phil looks up from a couple of blueprints, pushing his glasses up his nose as he nods. Tommy sits down across from him and folds his hands on the desk, brows furrowing as he tries to think of a way to phrase this that won't sound immensely concerning. He can't come up with anything.

“Uh... so y’know how Puffy called you that one time? Like, really cryptically?”

Phil blinks in surprise, but he nods nonetheless. “Yeah, of course I do, but how did you know about that?” he asks.

“Well, y’know how she’s, uh... she’s my other therapist?” Tommy asks, and Phil sighs as he nods again. Tommy knows Phil thinks it’s a dumb idea, but it’s been working relatively well thus far. Tommy fiddles with his fingers and focuses on his shoes. “She gets these... calls. When we’re done with our sessions. A-And after the first session, she called *you* about it, but she hasn’t since, and I was just... I was wondering if you knew anything about it.”

“I don’t really, not past what she said on our call,” Phil tells him, and Tommy nods, looking back up at him. Phil’s brows furrow, and he shifts in his seat, crossing his arms. “I’m not... entirely sure that this is it, but... it *could* be...”

“What? What is it?” Tommy asks, and Phil waves dismissively.

“I’m just thinking out loud, don’t worry about it,” he says, and Tommy gives him a flat look. If it’s something he ought to know, Phil just needs to *tell* him. Phil sighs. “Alright, well... what I’m about to tell you, you absolutely *cannot repeat*, do you understand?”

“That’s not ominous at all,” Tommy says, rolling his eyes, but he clears his throat and steels himself at Phil’s unamused glare. “Right, right, I won’t tell anyone. It’s between you and me.”

“And you *especially* cannot tell Tubbo,” Phil says, and Tommy scoffs. Phil gives him a pointed stare, and Tommy groans.

“Fine, fine, Tubbo won’t know either, swear it on Henry,” Tommy says, and Phil nods.

He leans forward a little, and Tommy’s leg bounces nervously. “What you need to understand is that Puffy had another son,” he says, and Tommy’s eyes go wide. “Something... wasn’t right with him. Puffy did all that she could, sent him to every therapist-inpatient, outpatient, psychiatrists, therapists, trauma specialists,

you name it-nothing worked. Kid emancipated himself at sixteen, and she never saw him again.”

“Wh... what the *fuck*? Why didn’t-how did we not know about this?!” Tommy demands, utterly baffled.

Phil rubs at his temples. “The kid was *dangerous*, Tommy. You couldn’t have been more than two when Tubbo came to live with Puffy, so you don’t remember this-and neither does Tubbo, which is why he *cannot know* about this-but he... he hurt Tubbo very badly. Hurt Foolish as well, it was... horrible. Puffy never stopped blaming herself,” he says, brows furrowed. “But after that, she kept the kid out of the house as much as possible. When you and Tubbo were four-the two of you must’ve been in daycare, but you were out of the house-Puffy brought the kid home for the afternoon, and... it didn’t end well. Tubbo and Foolish came to stay with us, and Puffy was scrambling to find help.”

“Why’s this-why is it a secret? What the fuck?! Why didn’t she tell Tubbo about it?!” Tommy demands, and Phil gives him a helpless sort of look. “No, no, Tubbo deserves to know! Why hasn’t he been told-”

“Because it’s an immensely traumatic thing, and Puffy hasn’t even been able to process through it fully yet. She’s always been worried he’d come back. Every therapist she’d asked had told her not to mention it until it was completely and utterly safe,” Phil says, and Tommy shrinks a little in his seat. “Wil and Tech probably remember him, and I’ve no doubt that Foolish does, but you and Tubbo... you were much too young. By the time you’d gotten old enough to tell, we thought it was over. Thought we’d never have to bring that up again. It was a *horrible* time, Tommy. Puffy was stretched so thin-she’d taken three jobs, for fuck’s sake-and we helped out as much as we could. She’s *still* paying off debts.”

Tommy’s memories of Puffy feel different now. Knowing all of this, knowing how much she’d been struggling and working, there’s so much that makes sense now. Phil packing extra in his school lunches and telling him to make sure he shares with Tubbo, Kristin picking him and Tubbo up and taking them to go do fun things, all the late nights at Tubbo’s house where Puffy hadn’t gotten back until

two or three in the morning-everything makes sense. She'd disappeared for days or even weeks at a time, which Tommy had never really understood, she'd told Tubbo they were business trips, but she must've been visiting her other kid, must've been tending to his appointments. She'd always looked so tired, so stressed, but Tommy remembers her as never failing to have a smile on her face.

Tommy looks up at Phil, brows furrowed. "Why hasn't he contacted her?" he asks. "The kid, I mean. Surely he-doesn't he want a family?"

"He might've found one of his own, might've *made* one of his own by now. He's about Techno's age, maybe a little younger. But he never tried calling. And I can't be *sure* that it's him, but... whoever it is, they're scaring Puffy enough to try and preemptively protect Tubbo and Foolish as much as she can, and I've never met anyone who's scared her as much as that kid," Phil tells him. "He might've changed his name by now, or changed his appearance. I just know Puffy wants nothing to do with him anymore, not when it could leave Tubbo and Foolish in danger."

"When you... when you say he hurt them," Tommy starts, "how... how *badly*...?"

He trails off, uncertain if he even *wants* an answer. Phil frowns. "He's put Foolish in the hospital more than once," he answers, and Tommy's stomach drops. "Tubbo went to urgent care, but he was ultimately fine-thank *God* for that."

"Did he ever hurt Wil? Or Techno?" Tommy asks.

Phil shakes his head. "No, but he never... he didn't particularly *care* about them. I've never seen a kid so... apathetic," he says, shuddering. And holy *hell* is that terrifying. Phil makes a face. "When you were born it was like... there was this weird *switch*. He was very gentle with you. Always very nice about it, always wanting to help out. It was like he saw you as... as a second chance."

Oh, boy, Tommy *hates* that.

So does The Sense.

"Well, how the *fuck* am I meant to respond to that?" Tommy huffs, laughing nervously, and Phil gives him a tired smile. Tommy shifts in his seat uncomfortably. "D'you... you really think he's threatening her?"

Phil sighs again and takes his glasses off to rub at the bridge of his nose. "I don't know, Tommy, I... it could be any number of things, but if you want my best guess, that's it," he says, and Tommy nods. Phil looks at him, *really* looks at him. "This stays between us. I'll talk to Puffy, I'll ask her about it more, I'll handle it, but Tommy... this is not something for you to worry about. Let me handle it. Don't put *any* pressure on yourself to fix this. It is *not* your problem. It isn't *Spider-Man's* problem, either."

"If she's in danger, am I meant to stand by and let whatever it might be happen to her?!" Tommy scoffs, and Phil gives him a flat look.

"Obviously not, but I don't want you to worry about it. If Puffy's in danger, she can handle it herself. I'll ask her about it, I'll reach out, I *will*. But you have enough on your plate, and this is the *last* thing you need to be adding to it," he says. Phil scrubs a hand over his face. "God, I don't even know why I *told* you, I... you should know, just in case, but *do not worry about it*."

Tommy's shoulders slump. "Alright, I... I'll let it go, just-the *second* she tells you she needs help, whatever it might be, *tell me*, okay? I don't want to stand by and let anyone else get hurt," he says, and Phil crosses his arms.

"This isn't your responsibility, and you shouldn't try and put it on yourself. Puffy's an *adult*. She has been *through this* before. The more we meddle, the more of a chance there is for us messing things up," Phil tells him. He reaches across the desk to grab Tommy's hand. "It's got nothing to do with you, whatever it is. You don't have to worry about it. Be safe, keep Tubbo safe, but Puffy's situation is *not* your responsibility."

"I'll keep Tubbo safe," Tommy agrees. "Foolish is in the States, he'll be fine, won't he? And... and you *promise* you'll help Puffy?"

"Of course," Phil says. "You just worry about yourself right now,

okay?”

Tommy grins, though it's a little shaky. “Wow, can't believe you're actually telling me to be selfish,” he jokes, and Phil ruffles his hair.

“You deserve to be,” Phil tells him. “You've more than earned it, mate.”

Finally, an insight as to what could be going on with Puffy!!

Go check out this lovely lovely art:

[This absolutely adorable art](#) of Wilbur and Sally!!

[This](#) really cute design of Spider-Innit!!

with great power

Chapter 58: with great power

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Tommy's heart skips a beat.

Automata's just thrown the fifth car of the day at him, and Tommy deftly dodges one of Blaze's drone's. The Sense is uneasy, on edge, even, as Tommy knocks 404 out and deftly slices through two drones with the barbs on his wrists.

"C'mon, fellas, give me a *real* challenge," Tommy says, leaping to the left as Automata rips a lamppost up from the concrete and sends it his way.

"I'll give you a challenge alright," Blaze says, and several more drones start to rise and head towards Tommy.

Tommy flips back as the drones start to fire, and he whips out webs at several of them, using those to smash the other drones to bits. Tommy whoops and catches the next car Automata throws at him, spinning it on his finger like a basketball. "You know, I've got a drone of my own," Tommy says, and he hears Tubbo snicker on the other end of the line.

"*On it, bossman*," he says, and Shroud whirs to life, much to Blaze's visible horror.

"What the *fuck?!*" Blaze yells, but there's no outrunning Tubbo.

Shroud drops a web bomb down on Blaze as Tommy sets the car back down, ducking out of the way of Automata's next fleet of scrap metal. "Disappointing," Automata grumbles as Blaze is promptly taken out of commission, stuck to the side of a building. Shroud

whirls and tries to drop another web bomb down on Automata, only to be foiled by the array of metal Automata sends its way. Tubbo is forced to make Shroud retreat, and Automata turns back to Tommy, shoulders squared. "You should really patent that. It's a neat invention."

Tommy makes a face. "I can't patent a *drone*, Auto-bitch, they've been around for ages," he huffs, throwing a few webs Automata's way and dodging as Automata throws a few car doors at him.

Automata tilts his head again. "This is getting on my nerves," he snarls, visibly angry for the first time since Tommy's been fighting him.

Grinning, Tommy swings up over Automata's head and lands a good few meters away, rolling his shoulders as he readies himself for the inevitable next onslaught. "I don't think this is going the way you want it to, green boy," Tommy says, retracting the barbs as Blaze struggles to free himself from the webs. Automata tilts his head, and Tommy grins. "Your buddies are down for the count. You really ought to start running, or I might just get you this time."

"Actually, I think you'll find it's the other way around," Automata says, voice coming from behind him-why is he *behind* Tommy?-and he disappears. Fuck. Fuck, they're *drones*. Vos-Fundy-had done that trick once, Tommy remembers, back when the old mayor had been assassinated. Tommy starts to jump, but metal traps his legs as Automata wraps an arm around his chest. As Tommy reaches up to grab at him, The Sense *screams*, and Tommy winces.

He'd hesitated.

There's a prickling sensation right under his ear, and Automata's letting him fall to the ground, hands clumsily splayed out beneath him. Tommy scrambles to stand, but his ears are ringing with the volume of The Sense's panic. "What the fuck did you do to him?!" someone shouts-it sounds like Blaze, but that can't be right, that *can't* be.

Automata steps back and tilts his head again. Tommy blinks. "Enjoy your last eight hours," he says, horrifically sweetly, and he tosses

something at Tommy's feet. "It's a special concoction of severely diluted cyanide and a few other chemicals, prepared in accordance with your superpowered biology *perfectly*. It's been made *just* for you."

Tommy's eyes go wide. "Cyanide...?" he asks, voice so terribly weak, and Automata nods eagerly.

It's horrifying.

"Yep! I made sure you had enough time to say your last goodbyes and everything!" he says, still so eerily cheerful, and Tommy feels nauseous. "Doesn't that make you feel *special*, Spider-Man?"

Before Tommy can say another word, Automata rushes to collect 404's limp form and Blaze-who's struggling against him, why's he struggling?-and dashes off somewhere.

Tommy looks down at his feet and stoops down to pick up the glass syringe on the ground.

"What the fuck?! What the fuck does he mean eight hours?! There's no way in hell it's cyanide, no fucking way! What the fuck?!" Tubbo screams in his ear, but Tommy can barely hear him. The Sense is wailing. *"Tommy, your vitals!"*

Tommy just stares at the syringe in his hand.

Today was just supposed to be a normal patrol.

"I think I need to come home."

Tommy sits numbly on his bed as Tubbo continues to hook him up to various machines.

He's been doing this for forty-five minutes now.

"Okay, it's gonna be fine, I'm gonna-I'll figure it out, I'm gonna find out what's in this shit and I'm gonna make you an antidote," Tubbo says shakily, but his hands are steady as he pricks the tip of

Tommy's finger, setting the blood microsample under a microscope. "If you're wondering where I got all this equipment from, don't. It's better if you don't ask."

Tommy just stares down at his hands. The finger that had been stuck with the tiny needle is already healed over. He feels a little woozy. "Tubbo," he starts uneasily, "I don't think—"

"No, no, it's fine, you're gonna be fine," Tubbo says, much too loud, and his voice just keeps *trembling*. "You're gonna be okay, it's gonna—I'm gonna fix this, it's not unfixable, I'll find out what we need for an antidote. You're not—you won't die, Tommy, I won't let it happen."

Tommy keeps staring at his hands. The Sense hasn't stopped fretting, though its volume has died down quite a bit. "Tubbo, I don't know if you *can* fix this," he says.

Tubbo looks at him like he's just killed a puppy. There's some fury mixed into the horror, and Tommy wonders if Tubbo's looked this pale the entire time. "You're *wrong*, I'm gonna fix this, I can—I'll research, I'll scour medical journals, I'll find whatever I can—I've already given you hydroxo-whatever and sodium nitrate, but I don't know what other chemicals—I!" Tubbo cuts himself off, turning back to his laptop screen. "There's a cure, there *has* to be, I'll make the fucking antidote myself if I have to!"

Well, Tommy isn't sure that's entirely feasible. Automata's got access to science that isn't even on public record; hell, he'd said himself that whatever he'd injected into Tommy's bloodstream is curated specifically for Tommy's biology. Tommy swallows, and Tubbo hands him another water bottle. This is the third one he's given Tommy in ten minutes.

"Water isn't going to flush it out of my system," Tommy says, but he drinks anyway, because Tubbo will be worried if he doesn't, because he wants to indulge in everything Tubbo's making him try. Tommy knows better than anyone what it feels like to think you could've tried something else, tried something *more*, and he doesn't want to put Tubbo through that. Tubbo types faster than Tommy's ever heard him type before, and Tommy flexes his fingers. "Tubbo,

I've only got seven hours left—

“No,” Tubbo says, vicious and heated and *scared*, “you’ve got your whole life left, you’ve got *years* ahead of you, don’t say shit like that, got it?!”

“Okay,” Tommy says softly, “I won’t.”

Tubbo nods to himself and turns back to the computer. The door opens, and Techno blinks. “Uh, it’s, like, eight o’clock, what’s Tubbo still doing here? What’s all this?” he asks, gesturing vaguely to the various IV’s and the few cardio memory loop sensors that Tubbo’s stuck on Tommy’s chest.

“I’m dying,” Tommy tells him.

Techno rolls his eyes. “I’m bein’ *serious*, what’s going on?” he says, and Tommy just stares at him. He can’t bring himself to say it again. Techno’s face falls. “Tommy, what’s... what’s happening? What is it?”

“I’m sorry,” Tommy says, voice cracking on the second syllable of ‘sorry,’ and Techno stares at him, wide-eyed and pale. He and Tubbo are both so pale. Tommy focuses on his hands again. “I mean, Tubbo’s trying to figure something out but—”

“I’m not *trying to*, I’m *going to*,” Tubbo grits out, and Tommy wishes he’d give up already. He doesn’t say this, obviously, because he’s kind of worried that Tubbo will yell at him if he does, but Techno lets out a strangled noise, like he knows what Tommy’s thinking. Tommy looks up again, and Tubbo marches over to Techno, dragging him in front of another monitor. “Start looking up numbers for poison control centers, every damn one in the city, none of them have taken me seriously, but *you* sound like an adult, so—”

“Right, yeah, we’ll call poison control,” Techno says, and Tommy feels a sort of dread creep up his spine. What the fuck do they even expect to happen? There’s no hope if *Tubbo* can’t find a cure; there’s no way for them to fix this beyond what Tubbo’s already done, which clearly hasn’t worked if The Sense is any indication. Techno pulls out his phone and swallows. “We’ll call them and we’ll

tell them-"

"Tell them *what?!*" Tommy shouts, and Tubbo and Techno both freeze up. "That I've had cyanide directly injected into my bloodstream?! Cyanide kills normal people in a matter of *minutes!* They won't send help, they'll send a fucking *hearse!*"

Tubbo fumbles with the keyboard for a second. "Then we'll take you to the hospital, we'll bring you there, we'll explain the situation," he says, and Tommy wants to scream or pound his fists against the ground or sob or *something*. "You'll tell them you're Spider-Man, you'll tell them, and they'll find out what the antidote should be-"

"Your own systems can't make heads or fucking tails of the shit he put in me, and *you* have access to the Guided Evolution files! So what the fuck is the *hospital* meant to do?!" Tommy cries out, arms wrapped around himself. Tubbo falters. Tommy takes a few deep breaths and wipes the tears off of his face. "We've been outsmarted, Big T. Plain and simple."

The devastation on Tubbo's face is almost too much to bear. "So that's... so that's it? We just-what, we give up?" he asks, brows pinched and bottom lip trembling, and Tommy gives him a helpless sort of shrug.

What is there to be done? No amount of working himself to death will let Tubbo find a nonexistent antidote. Tommy would like to see his best friend smile, if not just once, before the timer comes to zero, and Tubbo obsessing over the idea that he can somehow fix this, somehow reverse the presumably irreversible, doesn't allow for that.

"We're not-we aren't givin' up," Techno says firmly, though his voice trembles. It quivers with every consonant, every vowel, like he's having a hard time speaking at all. Techno puts a hand on Tommy's shoulder and crouches in front of him, eyes scanning over every inch of Tommy's face like he's trying to memorize all the creases and scars and blemishes there. "We'll keep looking, there's gotta be *something*, it's not-we'll tell Phil, we'll-"

"You can't tell Dad," Tommy interrupts in a near-whisper, and Techno looks bewildered at the mere idea. Tommy feels the corners

of his eyes start to prick with tears, and he sniffs. “*Please*, Tech. I can’t-if he knows, he’s gonna be-maybe it’s *selfish*, but I just don’t want...”

He trails off. Putting it into words will only make it feel more concrete, more inevitable. Tommy doesn’t want to die. He doesn’t want to keep looking at the time displayed on his cracked phone screen and feel his heart beat faster as the clock ticks down. He doesn’t want this *fear*, a horrible, festering sort of thing that sits in the pit of his stomach and wrenches his gut so bad that Tommy feels like he’s going to vomit.

“What don’t you want?” Techno asks, and Tommy feels so small.

“I don’t want my last moments with him to be sad,” Tommy confesses, a quiet prayer, and Techno’s entire being *drops*. His shoulders, his expression, his posture-it all falters. Tommy digs his front teeth down into his bottom lip, but the tears keep burning in the corners of his vision anyway. “A-And if we tell *him*, he tells *Mum*, who tells *Wilbur*, and-and I don’t get to leave with a *happy* memory, I have to leave with everyone mourning me before I’m *gone*, Techno, a-and I can’t-I don’t *want* that. Please, *please*, just give me this. Just this. I-I know, I know, it’s selfish, but-”

“It’s not... it’s not selfish,” Techno says, and Tommy wishes his voice wasn’t so shaky. Things were much less terrifying before Techno had visibly gotten scared. The determination and fury on Tubbo’s face has ebbed away into fear. Techno puts a hand on his arm, and the tears in Tommy’s eyes start to flow down his cheeks. “It’s okay. We’ll-we can tell him everything tomorrow. Don’t-don’t worry about anything, o-okay?”

Tubbo looks at him, and he’s looking at him the same way Techno had, like he’s trying to memorize Tommy’s face. “You’re-you want us... to stop looking for a solution?” Tubbo asks, disbelieving. “You just-you’re okay with...?”

“I’m not *okay* with it, I...” Tommy trails off, scrubbing a hand over his face. “Tubbo, we lost. /lost. It’s *over*-”

“No, no, it’s not-it can’t be,” Tubbo says, and Tommy sees his own

tears reflected on Tubbo's face. "It *can't* be over, surely not, *surely*. It can't be over, Tommy, because if it is-if we *lose* you, I-!"

He cuts himself off, squeezing his eyes shut as he turns away. Tommy stares down at his hands again. At his wrists. The skin is still red and raised, but he can't escape the danger this time. The danger is *in* him. The thing that's killing him is already there. It can't be stopped. Tommy is going to die. He's going to die in seven-six hours and forty-nine minutes.

"I don't want to die," Tommy says quietly. "I really don't want to die."

If Tommy dies today, what will he miss? He won't graduate, won't get to apply for universities with Tubbo and Ranboo, won't clutch at envelopes nervously with them as the three of them pray silently that they've all gotten into the same one. He won't see *Techno* graduate, won't get to see Techno's hard work pay off, won't ever get to see his brother fence again. He won't get to visit Wilbur, won't ever get to hear a new song, won't get to see him marry Sally.

And oh *God*, if that doesn't open up an entirely different can of worms. Tommy won't get to grow up. He won't get to drink-legally, at least-and he won't get to live on his own, won't ever get the chance to get married or have kids or have the choice to not do any of that. He won't get to have a job, won't get to pay *taxes*, and how stupid is it that he's crying over never getting to do fucking *taxes*?

His parents will outlive him. Phil and Kristin-they're going to find his body in the morning, cold and blank, and they're going to have to plan his funeral.

Everyone he loves is going to have to see his casket be lowered into the ground.

Tommy doesn't want to die.

He doesn't have a choice.

"I've got you," Techno whispers as Tommy starts to sob, a violent and angry cry ripping from his throat. He tucks his head into Techno's shoulder and clutches at his back. He's terrified. The fear

feels like a white-hot iron, searing the reminder of just how *permanent* death is into the gray matter in his skull. Techno's hands are shaking. "I've got you."

Tommy cries. Techno holds him as he does.

They stay like that for ten minutes and thirty-seven seconds, according to Tommy's clock.

He's wasted ten minutes and thirty-seven seconds.

"I-I want to... I wanna call everyone. To... to say goodbye," Tommy says after fourteen more seconds of silence, and Tubbo looks away, nodding as he tries to hide the way he swipes his tears aside. Tommy looks down at his phone. Twelve more seconds go by before he taps on Wilbur's number. The line rings three times-eight more seconds-before Wilbur picks up. Tommy smiles shakily. "Hey, Wil."

"*Hey, Toms, what's up?*" Wilbur asks, so casually, so very casually. Tommy is going to die tonight, and Wilbur doesn't even know. "*Tommy? Everything okay?*"

"Y-Yeah, Big Dubs, everything's-it's great," Tommy says, shakily smiling in spite of the terror that's sitting in his chest like a dragon guarding its treasure. "Um, could-can you come over tonight? Just... just for a little while?"

He doesn't want to say goodbye to Wilbur for the last time over the phone. It feels like he'd be doing Wilbur a disservice. Wilbur sighs. "*Tommy, I had plans tonight,*" he says, a little bit of edge to his voice. Tommy ignores the way his stomach drops. "*How important is it? What did you want to do?*"

"Just... I just wanted to watch a movie with you. And Mum and Dad. And Techno and Tubbo," he says quietly, softly. "Just a movie. That's all. Then I can't-I won't bother you anymore after that."

It's a promise, an accurate one at that, and Wilbur scoffs. "*Please, I highly doubt that,*" he says, teasing, and Tommy lets out a laugh tainted by tears. "*Tommy... you know you're not a bother, right? I*

mean, I was looking forward to something, but... I'll come over. What movie did you want us all to watch?"

Tommy swallows. "Up," he says, "I wanted to watch Up."

Wilbur huffs out a laugh at that. *"You and that fucking movie,"* he mumbles, not unkindly. *"I'll be over in a bit. You better make me popcorn."*

"I will," Tommy says with a sad sort of chuckle. Techno's looking at him like That again. "As much popcorn as you want, Wil. Promise."

"Mhm," Wilbur hums skeptically, *"see you soon."*

With that, he hangs up, and Tommy looks down at the phone again. "He's coming over?" Tubbo asks, delicately, like he's scared Tommy's going to break, and Tommy nods. His thumb hovers over Ranboo's contact, and Tubbo snuffles. "You should call him. He hates phone calls. But he'll answer. He always does."

Tommy nods. The line rings three more times-eight more seconds-and Ranboo picks up. *"Uh, why are you calling? Is there an emergency?"* Ranboo asks, and Tommy laughs a little. It's less tearful this time.

"No, no emergency, boob boy," he says, tracing quiet patterns on his mattress with his finger. He traces the pattern of a spider's web. "I just... felt like calling, I guess."

"Okay," Ranboo says, dragging out the 'o,' and Tommy smiles shakily. *"What, did you just want to hear my voice or something?"*

"Something like that," Tommy agrees. "I, uh... you're a great friend, Ranboo. I hope you know that. Best friend I could've asked for. Well, you're kind of tied w-with Tubbo on that one, but he already... I think he already knows that."

"Are you about to give me bad news?" Ranboo jokes, and Tommy's gut lurches. *"This feels like a lead-up to bad news."*

"No bad news," Tommy says quickly. "I just... I wanted you to know that. You're important to me, a-and I care about you. So much. You

know that, don't you?"

Ranboo is quiet for two and a half seconds. *"Yeah, man. 'Course I do,"* he says, and Tommy smiles to himself. Good. That's good. *"You're important to me, too. I, uh... I gotta go, though. I was having dinner when you called."*

"Oh, shit, big man, that's my bad," Tommy says, and Ranboo hums. "Go and have your dinner."

"It's that one thing that my mom makes that you really like," Ranboo tells him. *"Want me to save you some? I can bring it to lunch tomorrow."*

Tommy inhales sharply. "Yeah," he says, trembling again, "yeah, I'd like that."

"Okay. See you tomorrow," Ranboo says.

"See you," Tommy says.

Ranboo hangs up.

Tommy's bottom lip starts to tremble.

This is horrible. It feels like there's twelve tons of concrete on him again, but he can't just power through it this time. Tubbo and Techno just keep staring at him. "The syringe," Tubbo says suddenly, and Tommy's brows furrow. Tubbo taps on his phone-Shroud flies out the window-and he grins, almost manically. "The syringe! Remember, Automata tried to-he had a syringe the day that Phil... well, anyway, maybe I can trace the chemicals directly! Your body already started metabolizing it, breaking it down, but-but it's different if it's directly from the source, right? S-So maybe...!"

For a brief moment, Tommy lets himself hope. "I'm... I'm gonna call Puffy while you do that. Just in case," he says, smiling slightly, and Techno looks so very relieved. The Sense, however, isn't settled so easily. Tommy waits-this time it's only one ring, just a second or two-and he clears his throat. "Hey, Puffy."

"Hey, kiddo! Everything okay?" she asks, bright and cheerful and so

very calm. Tubbo's eyes are still on his phone.

"Yeah, no, everything's-it's all fine, I just, um... I wanted to talk to you, that's all," he says, and Puffy chuckles a little. Tommy fidgets with the bedsheets as he hears Shroud start to come back to the window. "Thank you. For everything you've done for me. I-I really... I really appreciate you, and I feel like I don't tell you that enough."

Puffy is quiet for a moment. "*Are you sure everything's okay?*" she asks, quietly, and Tommy sniffs as Shroud flies in and lands on the desk. Tubbo takes the syringe carefully out of the now-open panel and gets to work.

"I'm sure," Tommy tells her. "I've just been, um... thinking about stuff, y'know? I just wanna make sure that people-the people I care about-that they know I care about them as much as I do. That I'm glad they're in my life."

"*Okay,*" Puffy says, slow and unsure. "*If you're really sure there's nothing wrong.*"

"It's all okay, Puffy, geez," Tommy says, keeping his voice light even as he watches Tubbo's face fall. "Oh, uh, I-I have to go. I'll... talk to you later."

"*Tommy, I-*"

He hangs up then, because Tubbo has started to cry again. "Ricin," he says, "it's got ricin in it."

"What's ricin? What is that?" Techno demands immediately, standing to look at the computer, and The Sense starts to cry out in panic. Tommy ignores it. Techno scans over the monitor, brows furrowed. "Wh-Tubbo, what is it? What's ricin?!"

"There's no antidote," Tubbo whispers, terrified. "The cyanide, the other possible poisons-I-I could counteract those, I could-obviously, I couldn't use the antidotes that were potentially lethal if the poison wasn't actually *in* Tommy's system, but I-ricin doesn't-"

"So it really *is* hopeless," Tommy says, hollowed out like a jack-o-lantern. He'll rot just as quickly as one, anyway. Tubbo starts to type

furiously again, and Tommy shuts his eyes in frustration, sighing.
“Big T-”

“No!” Tubbo shouts. Techno has wordlessly put a hand to his own mouth, eyes wide and terrified-Tommy’s never seen him so scared before, not like this, not this pure, paralyzing horror-and Tubbo’s grip on the syringe tightens a bit. There’s no danger of the syringe breaking, though; it’s plastic, not glass. Idly, Tommy thinks that’s good. It can’t harm anyone else. Tubbo’s brows are pinched. “It’s not *fair*.”

Tommy stands, gently prying the IVs and cardio memory loop sensors and wires away from his body. “Tubbo,” he says gently, quietly enough that Tubbo has to pay attention, because Tommy is only ever *quiet* when things are serious. “It’s not... there’s nothing more to be done. You did *everything* you could.”

“Not everything,” Tubbo whispers, “I could’ve-Shroud has more weapons, I should have used them in the fight, I-”

“It wasn’t your fight,” Tommy tells him, “it was mine. My fight. My decision. *My* hesitation. It’s not your fight and it’s not your fault.”

“I could have-”

“There isn’t anything else you can do,” Tommy says, voice barely above a whisper, and Tubbo’s chest starts to stutter as he tries not to cry. Tommy puts a hand on his shoulder. “Tubbo, you are... the *best* friend I have ever had the *privilege* of having. You’re brilliant, man. If there was a solution, you’d have found it by now. It’s okay. You... you did the best you could.”

Tubbo shakes his head. “No, no, I-you can’t just *give up*,” he says, fierce even while his voice trembles something terrible, even as his hands start to shake at his sides. “I-I won’t let you.”

What can he say that will comfort Tubbo? Tommy doesn’t even want to accept the reality of the situation himself, but what choice does he have? They’ve tried everything. *Everything*. There isn’t anything left to do. Tommy needs a way to phrase that, a way to phrase that it’s *his* fight, *his* consequences, and that Tubbo cannot *possibly* be to

blame. Tubbo wasn't the one bitten by the spider. Tubbo wasn't the one who made the choice to protect the city. Tommy was.

"With great power... comes great responsibility," Tommy tells him. "I protected the city as well as I could because it was the right thing to do. I don't regret that for a second. I mean, I *do* hate the way it's ending-I-I don't *want* it to end. But I made my choice, Tubbo. This isn't on you. It's not on Techno, not on Phil, not on you, not on anyone else but me."

Tubbo tugs him into a tight hug, his tears dampening Tommy's shoulder. "That's a stupid fucking philosophy," he manages through sobs, and Tommy laughs shakily. "Fuck the city, fuck the villains, fuck everybody, *you're* more important."

"That's not a great philosophy either, big man," Tommy mumbles, and Tubbo just hugs him tighter. "There's no going back now. No point on... on dwelling what we can't fix. Just... give me tonight. Let me go with a smile on my face, yeah?"

"We'll do whatever you want," Tubbo promises. "Anything."

"Well *now* I'm gonna tell you to let me win at Mario Kart. Fuck being responsible with power, I'm gonna exploit the shit out of this," Tommy jokes, and Tubbo makes a noise between a sob and a laugh. Tommy pulls away and turns to Techno, a shaky smile on his face. "I'm gonna miss you. So much."

"But you *won't*," Techno says, still so terrified. It's not a fitting emotion on him. Tommy takes his hands and smiles again. Techno starts to cry. "You *won't* miss us. You're just gonna be *gone*, you're gonna... Tommy, I am *so sorry*."

"Don't be," Tommy says quickly. "Nothing to be sorry for."

Techno shakes his head. "No, no, I've... I've got plenty to be sorry for," he says. "I wish I'd been a better brother to you. And I am *never* gonna forgive myself for that."

"And what if my dying wish is for you to forgive yourself, hm? Gonna say no to a poor dying bastard, Techno?" Tommy jokes, but Techno

nearly knocks him over with a hug, and Tommy snuffles as Techno grips him like it's the last chance at a hug he'll ever get. "C'mon, don't get sappy on me, now. I've still got, like, six and a half hours."

"I'm going to throttle you if you don't stop jokin' about this," Techno says, but Tommy knows he doesn't mean it. "This can't... it *can't* be the end, Tommy, there's still-there's so much left for you to *do*-"

"Hey," Tommy interrupts, "don't think about that, or *I'll* start thinking about it, and... and I don't want to spiral. I don't want to leave thinking about all the bad stuff, okay?"

"Of course," Techno says quickly, "I'm sorry."

"Stop *apologizing*," Tommy says, feigning exasperation. He pulls back, and Techno wipes at his red-rimmed eyes, rolling his shoulders. Tommy knocks his knuckles weakly against Techno's arm. "C'mon, let's just... let's pretend like it's any other night."

"Okay," Techno agrees.

"Let's go watch Up," Tommy says, and Tubbo smiles at him, still clearly on the verge of tears.

Tommy needs to pretend things are normal right now. He needs to pretend like he doesn't notice the way The Sense is crying out. He needs to think of tonight not as his last, but as one that has to *mean* something. Tommy needs a distraction, needs something to keep him from thinking about the clock's ever-steady ticking down. He gets to be selfish tonight, gets to ask for that.

It's the last thing he's asking for.

The lot of them are packed onto the couch.

Tubbo has glued himself to Tommy's side-as has Techno-and Wilbur keeps giving the three of them slightly annoyed looks. Tommy thinks this is understandable, given that Wilbur is currently squished up against the arm of the sofa. Phil and Kristin, on the other hand, have wisely chosen to sit elsewhere.

Tommy's trying to watch the movie, really he is; it's his favorite, after all, and he doesn't want to keep missing out on watching it for the last time. He just keeps getting distracted by everyone else, by all their little habits. Phil will see Kristin's nose wrinkle in the corner of his eye and gently brush her hair from her face. Kristin picks at the loose threads on the armchair when there's a particularly nerve-wracking scene in the movie. Wilbur hums along to the soundtrack under his breath without realizing it.

Tubbo and Techno had both started bawling after Ellie had died.

Tommy wants to take this moment and bottle it, to put it in his pocket and keep it with him until his time is up. Things feel a lot less terrifying-a lot less overwhelming-now that he's with the people he loves. Wilbur's ankles poke into his arm obnoxiously as he lays his legs across Techno's, and Tubbo's elbow is jutting into Tommy's side. Tommy loves every second of it.

The movie-Tommy can practically recite half of it by memory-is still playing, and Tommy is content. For now, he's content. He's going to miss this, but he's content. He's happy. This is a good place to leave off on. Tommy's got one last night with his family, and there's part of him that hates the fact that this is what Automata had intended to happen, but he's not about to get upset over it, not when it's already over, not when it's done with.

The credits roll. Tubbo is still silently crying. Techno's arm around him is tighter than it would normally be. Tommy looks over to Wilbur and smiles shakily. "Thanks for coming, Wil," he says, and Wilbur just yawns and nods. They're nearing just four hours left now. "Sorry for interrupting your plans."

Wilbur shrugs and stands, ruffling Tommy's hair. There's another thing Tommy's going to miss terribly. "It's alright, Toms. I've gotta get going, though, I told Sally I'd probably be back before midnight, and if I'm not back soon, she'll start watching our show without me," he says, and Tommy laughs.

"Alright, well... tell her I said hi," he says, standing too, and Wilbur claps a hand on his shoulder, grinning. Tommy hesitantly pulls Wilbur in for a hug. "I'll see you around. Goodnight, Wil. I love you."

“Love you too, weirdo,” Wilbur says, a little puzzled, but he returns the hug anyway.

Wilbur pulls on his coat and takes Jubilee’s keys out of the bowl in their front hallway, the bowl that Tommy and Tubbo had painted together in a primary school art class, and he gives them all one last wave. Tommy tries his hardest to memorize Wilbur’s face before he goes out the door, and he knows now why Techno and Tubbo have kept looking at him the same way.

They’re scared they won’t get another chance.

Tommy turns to Phil and Kristin, pointedly not looking at Techno and Tubbo’s twin terrified expressions, and he grins as brightly as he can. “Thanks. That was fun,” he says, and Phil gives him a tired sort of smile. It’s later than he usually goes to bed. “You should get some rest, old man. You too, Mum. I-I love you guys.”

“Rough day, mate?” Phil asks with a knowing look that doesn’t really know anything at all, and Tommy nods.

“Yeah, something like that,” he says, and his throat feels tight. He pulls Phil in for a hug too, then Kristin.

“We’ll see you in the morning,” Kristin calls over her shoulder as the pair of them head upstairs, and Tommy nods, even though she can’t see him.

He turns back to Techno and Tubbo, taking a shaky breath. “Well, that wasn’t so hard,” he says, and Tubbo looks away. Techno looks at him. Tommy smiles. “What would you fellas say to a good old-fashioned sleepover?”

“Whatever you want,” Tubbo says quickly. “Of course.”

Tommy leads the way back upstairs—he can hear them quietly crying behind him—and he gets changed into something more comfortable. “Hey, do you still have that recording of the one song Wilbur almost made you delete?” he asks, and Techno fishes his phone from his pocket, handing it over once he’s found it. Tommy grabs a pair of headphones and lets out a shaky, sad laugh as he plugs them in.

"Hope you don't mind if I, um... if I listen to it for a minute."

Tubbo smiles at him. "Go for it, bossman," he says, and Tommy nods. Less than four hours are left now.

Tommy puts the headphones in and sits down on the bed, letting his eyes shut. Wilbur's music is nice. Well, it's more than nice, but Tommy's never really been able to describe it right. He supposes now that he never will. The Sense throbs as his muscles start to ache. It's taken a while, but Tommy thinks he's finally starting to feel the physical effects of the poison.

"Come sit with me?" he asks, blinking his eyes open-blinking through tears-to look at Tubbo and Techno, who immediately move to sit on either side of him. Wilbur's soft voice and gentle strumming fills his ears, and Tubbo laces their fingers together as Tommy leans his head on Techno's shoulder.

This, Tommy decides, is enough.

The music fades. Tommy plays the recording again. It's a bit tinny now that he's *really* listening to it, but the music room's never been great for recording. Wilbur's guitar is at his new flat now, and Tommy wonders if he'd have brought it if Tommy had asked. Knowing Wilbur, he'd probably bitch about it, but he'd bring it anyway. He'd have played if Tommy had asked.

Wilbur's good like that.

There's a few moments where Tommy's pretty certain Techno's tears have fallen into his hair, but he says nothing. The recording fades out again, and Tommy takes the headphones off. "Is there anything else you want to do?" Tubbo asks him, soft and scared, and Tommy shakes his head.

"I think... I think I want to go to bed. It feels less frightening if I think of it like I'm just... falling asleep," Tommy says, bottom lip quivering. "Thank you for staying with me."

"I'm so sorry," Tubbo whispers, an admission, a confession, even though Tommy's heard it before. "I couldn't-I know it's not my

responsibility, but I-I feel like I failed you.”

“Nah. You could never fail me, Big T,” Tommy tells him. “It’s you and me against the world, remember?”

Tubbo gives him a smile that feels more like a grimace. Tommy smiles back. “Yeah,” Tubbo says, and Tommy gives his hand a squeeze, “I know.”

Tommy reaches across Techno to turn his lamp off. “I’m just going to sleep,” Tommy tells Techno quietly, reaching up to wipe a tear from his brother’s cheek. “Just a quick rest.”

For some reason, Techno’s tears fall faster. Tubbo sobs quietly to his left. “You keep comfortin’ us when we should be the ones comfortin’ *you*,” Techno says. His voice is still so shaky.

Tommy doesn’t want to be scared. He *is*, but he doesn’t want to be. If this were ending in any other way than death, he would probably be sobbing and screaming and demanding justice. But he’s so very tired. And if he wastes what precious time left he has on anger, on fear, on sadness, then there’s no room left for rest. No room left to die calmly, to die happily, to die in a gentle way.

A bit of this reasoning is just to spite Automata, but that’s just for Tommy to know.

Tommy doesn’t want to die violently. He knows cyanide poisoning—poisoning in general—is painful and horrid, and he doesn’t want to be awake for it. He doesn’t want Techno and Tubbo to have to witness it. He wants them to fall asleep before he does, just in case. Just in case.

“I’ve made my peace with it,” Tommy lies, because of *course* he hasn’t. This is unfair. This is unjust. This is horrible and *scary* and destroys him a little inside. But he doesn’t want to leave on a sour note. He doesn’t want that. He can’t give that to Automata. “C’mon, Tech. Let’s sleep.”

Tubbo clings to him as the three of them throw a blanket over themselves. “I won’t let them win,” Tubbo promises him, a quiet and

sacred statement, and Tommy smiles at him. "They won't take anything from anyone else ever again."

"What, like, the things that they've stolen?" Tommy asks, a bit confused.

Tubbo shakes his head. "They're taking *you*," he says, eyes welling with tears that Tommy knows he'll let fall soon. "They won't get to do that to anyone else. Not on my watch."

"You're a good lad, Tubbo," Tommy tells him. "You're gonna grow up and do great things, I just *know* it."

Tubbo smiles tiredly at him. Tommy's well aware he's trying to stay awake, but Tubbo's always been the first to fall asleep at their sleepovers. It's resulted in plenty of pranks, after all. Tommy doubts that the pattern's going to break now.

Sure enough, about ten minutes pass-Tommy counts the seconds, they're getting closer to just three hours-and Tubbo's quiet snores fill the room. Techno looks over to him, and Tommy lifts the arm not being used as a pillow for Tubbo to his face, silently shushing Techno.

"It's okay if you're scared," Techno whispers. "I'm scared too."

"Oh, I'm terrified," Tommy murmurs back. "I don't want to die, Tech. I really don't. So that's... that's why I'm just... going to sleep. Right?"

"Right," Techno says, and Tommy wishes he'd stop crying. He hates how foreign it looks on Techno's face. "You're just gonna go to sleep."

Tommy swallows. "And... and we'll have breakfast tomorrow," he says. Techno's brows pinch together, and Tommy gives him what's got to be the world's shakiest smile. "You'll drive me to school in Dad's car. Me and Tubbo will piss off our teachers, and I'll go on patrol, and you'll be waiting for me when I get home, won't you? You'll be waiting?"

"Yeah, buddy," Techno says, "I'll be waiting."

Nodding, Tommy hums. "Good. That's good," he says.

Devastation has never come so quietly to him before.

Techno looks at him again, but this time, it's different. Tommy doesn't have a name for the emotion he sees on Techno's face. "I love you, kid. You're the best little brother I ever could have asked for," Techno tells him.

"Pancakes tomorrow?" Tommy asks, instead of saying it back, because he feels like if he does, it's going to feel too final, too much like a goodbye.

"Pancakes tomorrow," Techno agrees, because he knows.

Tommy waits in the dark of the room, in the softness of Tubbo's quiet snoring and Techno's eventual steady breathing, glancing over every so often at his alarm clock. There's just under two hours left now. Two hours until his organs will shut down. Two hours until he shuts his eyes for the final time. Two hours until the last breath leaves his lungs in a rasp.

Tommy's not sure how many hours it'll be until Techno and Tubbo wake up next to his corpse.

He wants to see the stars.

He hasn't looked at them properly in ages.

Tommy *really* wants to see the stars.

Carefully, he worms his way out from under Techno and Tubbo's grips. He looks over at his desk, where Henry is sitting. He takes hold of Henry, and he slips out of his window. The view from their roof is never good. London's got too much light-pollution to properly see the stars from this low to the ground.

So Tommy goes higher.

There's no point in hiding his identity anymore. The most important people are bound to know tomorrow, and it's not as if anyone's out and about at this time of night. Tommy swings up to a rooftop in the

abandoned quarter-it's the most out of the way, after all-and he sits at the edge of it, legs dangling over the lip of the concrete. He lays back, Henry clutched in both hands as he looks towards the sky.

The stars are quite pretty. Tommy's never paid much attention to them before. He's always written them off as something guaranteed, something he'll be seeing every night, so surely, he doesn't have to bother looking at them. He remembers being a kid, being six or seven, and looking up at the stars with Wilbur.

Wilbur's always loved stargazing. Sappy bastard.

He'd point up at the constellations and tell Tommy to look, to pay attention, because *tonight, only tonight*, his favorite constellation is in view. He would get so huffy if Tommy's attention span had faltered, and Tommy had never understood why. They were just stars, after all, and they'd be around forever. They'd be around even after he and Wil were gone.

They'll be around when Tommy is gone.

Tommy wonders if he remembers any of the constellations Wilbur had pointed out to him, but his memories from so long ago are hazy. Fuzzy, even. But he does remember the ferris wheel, being crammed into that tiny cart with Ranboo and Tubbo, and Tommy searches for Cygnus.

He sees it! At least, he *thinks* that's it. The stars are in the shape of a swan; Tommy wishes he could tell Ranboo that he's finally seen it, finally understood why Ranboo had been so quick to point it out. It's rather beautiful. Tommy lifts a hand into the air and traces the shape of it with his finger delicately, clutching Henry closer to his chest with his other hand.

Orpheus, huh? Tommy thinks the guy's a stupid bastard. All he'd had to do was not look back at Eurydice. He'd had one job, and he couldn't even do it right. Too caught up with either excitement or doubt-Tommy doesn't remember which version of the story Techno had liked more-Orpheus had doomed the love of his life.

Tommy thinks that stories with sad endings are stupid. Anything that

ends with the main character miserable, ends with them losing something or someone important to them, or ends with them dead- it's all bullshit. Sad stories happen all the time in real life, and Tommy can't bring himself to understand why someone would want a character-want their creation-to suffer like that, to end their story with suffering.

On some level, Tommy doesn't want his story to end like that either.

On another, Tommy knows that it can't be helped.

The pain is really starting to set in now. The Sense is panicking. Tommy tries to memorize the stars as he lets his eyelids flutter closed. Had he tidied his room today like he'd promised Phil he would? He can't remember.

He'll probably be forgiven either way.

Tubbo awakens to the beeping of his phone's alarm.

Then, he sits up with a start.

"Techno!" he hisses, shaking Techno awake. "Tommy's gone!"

Techno makes a face. "Whuh?" he grumbles, very eloquently, and Tubbo very nearly shoves him off the bed. Techno sits up, brows furrowed in anger that's quickly replaced by horror. "Oh. Oh no. How-how long do we have until...?"

"Fifteen minutes," Tubbo says, rolling out of the bed and stifling a yawn as he turns his laptop back on, and Techno pulls on his coat. "I set it so that I'd be awake to make sure I was still holding his hand before he-a-anyway, I'm tracking his phone right now. Fucker always takes it with him everywhere, right? S-So it should be-I can track it."

"Okay," Techno says, voice thick with sleep, and Tubbo types furiously. "Why did you... want to make sure that you were holding his hand?"

"It's what he asked Ranboo to do when the building got dropped on him. Ranboo told me about it in the hospital," Tubbo confesses, and he finally, *finally* pinpoints Tommy's location at the top of a building that's a ten minute drive away. Tubbo quickly sends the address to Techno's phone and pulls on a coat of his own-it's Tommy's, but it'll have to do-and he practically shoves Techno out the door. "C'mon, we're losing time!"

"I know, I know, I'm going," Techno says. Tubbo shudders at the cold, but the two of them pile into the car soon enough. Techno peels out of the driveway, glaring at the stupid navigator app that's telling him to go a million different ways.

Tubbo calls Tommy's phone. "Come on, pick up, pick *up*," he hisses. There's no answer from the other end. Tubbo resists the urge to slam his phone against the dashboard as Techno swerves around a corner. "Fuck, can't you drive any faster?!"

"I'm goin' thirty over," Techno snaps back, "you're lucky there's no one else on the roads, or we'd be *dead*!"

"*Tommy's* going to be dead if we don't *hurry up*!" Tubbo shouts, and Techno throws them around another corner. Tubbo looks down at his phone. Eleven minutes and forty-nine seconds. Forty-eight. Forty-seven. "Techno, come *on*!"

"I'm going as fast as I can!" Techno tells him, sounding panicked, and while yeah, Tubbo's on the verge of having a conniption, he probably shouldn't fuck with the only one out of the two of them that's capable of driving. Techno gives Tubbo a wary look. "Your seatbelt's on tight, right?"

"Wh-fucking of *course* it is! That's not important!" Tubbo yells.

"It's *important* because I can't have *both* of you dead!" Techno bellows back, and they turn yet another sharp corner.

"Fuck," Tubbo whispers. "I'm sorry."

Techno waves him off, eyes still narrowed at the road ahead.

Seven minutes and thirty-six seconds.

Thirty-five.

Thirty-four.

Techno slams on the brakes, the tires squealing as the rubber grinds against the asphalt. They come to a stop in front of the building, and Tubbo runs to the door, letting out a shout of frustration as the doors rattle but don't open. "Move," Techno tells him, and Tubbo complies without question.

Techno backs up and takes a running start at the doors, shouldering them open. An alarm starts to blare, but Tubbo spots the lift, and the two of them sprint for it. The lift's gonna be faster than having to run up forty flights of stairs, after all.

Tubbo wants to short out the speakers in the lift. This music is *not* appropriate for what's happening right now.

As soon as the lift doors open, the two of them run into the hallway it's opened up into, freezing in place. "Shit," Tubbo mutters, "how do we get to the roof?"

Techno runs ahead, turns a corner, then peeks around it, waving Tubbo over. Tubbo runs. He's terrified that they'll run out of time. "Over here! It's five flights," Techno warns him, shouldering that door open too, and the alarms get louder.

Tubbo doesn't care.

Tubbo *can't* care.

Not when Tommy's alone on the roof.

Not when there's only three minutes and twenty-three seconds left.

Twenty-two.

Twenty-one.

Techno is faster than he is up the stairs, and Tubbo's started to huff and puff after just three flights. Techno looks down at him, terrified, and Tubbo waves for him to go up ahead, but Techno rushes back

down the stairs and crouches down so that he can carry Tubbo on his back as he thunders up the stairs.

“Please,” Tubbo begs quietly, *“please.”*

Techno sets him down at the top landing-Tubbo feels like he’s about to fall over-and he kicks down the door to the roof.

They have a little under a minute left.

Fifty-eight.

Fifty-seven.

Fifty-six.

The two of them run out onto the roof, and Tubbo feels a cold horror wash over him at the sight of a figure on the rooftop. There’s a person in their arms. Tubbo grabs Techno’s arm, and Techno hesitates. The figure on the rooftop has a television instead of a face.

Tommy is limp in Automata’s arms, eyes staring and unseeing as his head lolls.

“If you’ll excuse me, gentlemen,” Automata says coolly, and Tubbo’s grip on Techno loosens, “I have to take my little brother home.”

Tubbo just stands there, paralyzed with pure terror, as Techno makes one last desperate sprint at Automata.

Automata steps off of the roof with Tommy still in his arms.

Techno had just missed his coattails.

Three.

Two.

One.

Zero.

The story's not over just yet.

There's still work to be done, after all.

Go look at these fantastic works by these incredible artists:

[This](#) amazing art of Tommy in the fitting room in chapter 56!!

[These](#) really cool guided evolution sketches!!

[This](#) breathtaking design of Sally, it's *exactly* how I picture her!!

comes great responsibility

Chapter 59: comes great responsibility

Tubbo, Techno, Phil, and Kristin in the aftermath.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Tubbo has never heard Techno scream.

It's a horrible, blood-curdling sort of sound.

Tubbo has never seen Techno fall to his knees.

It's a terrifying, sobering sight.

Tubbo takes a numb step forward, silent tears streaming down his face as he walks. His foot bumps into something, and Tubbo slowly looks down. He crouches, ears ringing, and he gently takes hold of Henry.

Tommy would never have left Henry behind.

Tommy had left Tubbo behind.

That's unfair. Tommy hadn't had a choice. Tubbo has no doubts that Automata would have sought his location out regardless of where he'd died. Tubbo's fingers tighten around the little plush cow, to the point where his knuckles start to go white, and he gasps through a sob. He clutches Henry to his chest, crying out to the sky.

He's vaguely aware that they're causing a scene, that people are coming out to their balconies and windows to seek out the source of the echoing screams, but Tubbo can't bring himself to care. The

alarms of the building are still blaring, and Tubbo has no doubt that the cops are on their way to investigate.

But right now, the only thing Tubbo feels is hollowed out.

Gutted like a goddamned fish.

Tubbo looks up, looks over at Techno, who's still clinging to the ledge of the roof. "Techno," he croaks, voice hoarse, but Techno doesn't look at him. Tubbo tries again. "*Techno!*"

"He was right there," Techno sobs, and Tubbo knows he probably looks every bit a mess as Techno does right now. "He was *right there*."

Tubbo staggers up and makes his way over to Techno. "We have to go," Tubbo says.

"I was right there," Techno whispers.

"I know," Tubbo says, shaky, "but we have to go."

"I could almost reach him," Techno says, voice breaking, and Tubbo can feel the familiar sting of tears at the corners of his eyes. "He was right *there*."

Tubbo lets his eyes slide shut. He wishes he could stop crying already. "I-I know, Techno, I... we have to go," he urges, "the cops are coming, we have to get back, Techno-"

"He died alone," Techno cries, and Tubbo's last scraps of resolve and composure break. He falls to his knees next to Techno, clutching Henry to his chest again and sobbing. Tommy *had* died alone. He'd died alone on a rooftop, cold and probably terrified. Techno tugs Tubbo in for a hug, but Tubbo just sobs into his shoulder. His hands remain wrapped around Henry. Techno holds him so tightly that it's starting to hurt, but Tubbo says nothing. "I'm so sorry, Tubbo, I-if I was faster, I-!"

"Don't do that, don't blame yourself," Tubbo tells him. "Tommy would be kicking your ass for it if he knew you were, bossman."

Techno pulls away from the hug and Tubbo watches as the color drains from his face at the sight of Henry. "He took Henry?" Techno asks, barely above a whisper. Tubbo nods, and though he doesn't let go of Henry, he does hold the little plush out. Techno chokes-he's probably trying to stifle a cry-and he smooths a finger over one of the buttons that are meant to be Henry's eyes. "He's just a *kid*, Tubbo."

"I know," Tubbo whispers, throat raw and scratchy. "I know."

"What am I gonna tell Dad?" Techno asks, more to Henry than to Tubbo, and Tubbo shudders at the sound of thunder on the horizon. "What am I supposed to *say*?"

Tubbo knocks his knuckles against Techno's arm. "Hey, I-I'll help explain," he says, and Techno nods. Tubbo doesn't want to let go of Henry. "We don't... Techno, we don't have a body to bring home."

Techno's shoulders start to shake again. "He must've been in so much pain," he says, and Tubbo really wants him to stop talking.

Idly, he thinks that that's a rather cruel thought to have.

"We have to go," he says instead, because they have to leave before the police get there. Judging by the sirens a little ways away, they don't have much time.

It's started to rain.

Tubbo hates it.

Tommy's a fucking supernova. He's a right annoying bastard, but he's bright and he's *warm* and he's a goddamned *gift* of a human being. Tubbo shudders again as there's more thunder. He stares up at the sky, squinting at the few droplets of rain that fall on his face. What kind of world lets this happen? What kind of world kills the best part of itself?

The universe has no right to mourn.

The universe has no right to grieve.

There is no justice, Tubbo decides then and there. There cannot be justice, not karmic or otherwise, not when Tommy is dead.

A force of unfiltered good is gone.

Tubbo feels hollow.

London feels empty.

Techno helps him up, and when Tubbo gives him an inquisitive look, he reaches towards Henry, hesitating halfway through. "Tommy hates it when Henry gets wet," Techno says.

That's good enough reason for Tubbo.

A couple of hours have passed by the time they get back to the house.

Tubbo feels numb. He's fairly certain that Techno feels the same, given that both of their explosive reactions had sort of tapered out into a somber sort of silence after a while. The officer that had taken the two of them down to the station had let them both go after they'd explained that a villain had attacked Tommy. Thankfully, but not thankfully, because that's horrible, she had lost someone to a villain attack too. She'd been sympathetic.

The door is still unlocked-Tubbo doesn't want to think about the fact that that's how they'd left it on their way to that stupid fucking building-and Techno pushes it open, hands still shaking.

The rain hasn't stopped.

Tubbo hangs his-Tommy's-jacket on the coat rack. Techno looks over to the stairs, and Tubbo winces. "Boys?! Are you back?!" Phil's voice says frantically, and there's some commotion from the kitchen. Tubbo wonders why he's up so early.

As soon as Phil comes into the hallway, Techno's facade of restrained numbness crumbles, and he moves forward, stumbling into Phil's arms. "I'm sorry," he sobs, and Tubbo looks away, "I'm so

sorry.”

“Woah, woah, what’s going on, mate? What’s-where’s...?” Phil trails off, eyes widening as his gaze snaps to Henry, still clutched desperately in Tubbo’s hands, and he stumbles back from Techno, a shaky hand coming up to cover his mouth. Tubbo doesn’t want to be the one to say it, but he flinches. Phil shakes his head. “No, *no*, where’s-Techno, where’s Tommy?!”

Techno shakes his head and turns away, hands clasped over his face. His knuckles are white. Tubbo steps forward, and he offers Henry to Phil. There’s nothing left to say. “I’m sorry,” Tubbo says, and the words feel heavy on his tongue. They feel foreign, even though Tubbo’s said them so many times in his life, so many times in the past ten hours.

Phil takes hold of Henry with a shaking hand, and his cane clatters to the ground as he slumps against the wall, the hand not holding Henry bracing desperately against the plaster. Phil looks down at Henry, and Tubbo watches with numb terror as Phil’s face collapses into the most raw devastation Tubbo’s ever seen on a person.

Tubbo doesn’t want to look, but it’s as if he can’t look away.

The first of Phil’s wails erupts as his forehead presses gently against Henry’s cotton fur. Tubbo’s eyes squeeze shut. He clamps his hands over his ears as Phil’s scream of a sob echoes around the hall, and he feels Techno’s arms surround his shoulders. Tubbo cries quietly. His tears slip down into his mouth, and Tubbo grimaces; they taste more bitter than they had earlier.

Techno starts to murmur something to him-Tubbo’s hands are still over his ears, so Techno sounds rather muffled-and Tubbo shakes his head frantically. He doesn’t want to share condolences, doesn’t want to listen to everyone sob and scream and cry all over again. Maybe it’s selfish, maybe he’s cruel, but Tubbo can’t fucking *take* this anymore.

“Phil?! Phil, what’s wrong?!” Kristin’s frantic voice yells from where Tubbo knows the stairs are, loud enough to break through the shield of Tubbo’s hands, and Techno pulls away from him. He opens his

eyes, chest hiccupping as he looks over at Kristin, who's rather frazzled, clearly having just woken up. "What's going on?"

"Tommy's... he's-" Techno cuts himself off, taking a deep breath. He looks over at Tubbo, hesitant for some reason. "How do we-do we tell her about the...?"

Phil is still sobbing softly. Tubbo keeps his eyes on Techno as Kristin hurries to Phil's side, still looking to them for an explanation. There's a quiet sort of dread dawning on her face. Tubbo exhales shakily. "Tommy is..." he trails off. Should he say 'was' or should he keep it present tense? It feels wrong to say 'was,' but that's just... more accurate. Fuck accuracy. "Tommy is Spider-Man."

Kristin freezes, Phil tenses, and Techno swallows audibly. "He was-the fight yesterday was, um-well, i-it ended with Automata... injecting him with poison," Techno explains, voice shaking, and Tubbo winces.

"What?" Kristin asks, quiet and terrified, and Techno nods shakily. Kristin looks to Phil, who's still cradling Henry, and she looks to Techno again, eyes wide. "Tommy's... he's Spider-Man? Did all of you know about this?"

"He didn't want you t-to get hurt," Phil manages, and Kristin reaches a shaking hand to her mouth, her shoulders tense. "He told us we couldn't tell anyone, not you o-or Wil-"

"You said poison?" Kristin interrupts, and Tubbo inhales sharply through his teeth as Phil stiffens. Techno wraps his arms around himself and nods. "Poison? What... is that... what does that *mean*, Techno?!"

Techno mumbles something under his breath, and Tubbo shifts uncomfortably. "I couldn't find an antidote," he says, and Kristin and Phil both snap their attention to him. Tubbo feels quite nauseous. "It was-the chemicals were..."

"Ricin and cyanide," Techno croaks, "and things that... that Tubbo's computer couldn't even recognize."

“W-Why didn’t you call poison control, why didn’t you *tell us?!* ” Phil says, and his voice shakes. Tubbo looks away.

Kristin puts a hand on Phil’s arm, still seemingly in shock. “Techno, was... was that why he asked us all to...?” she trails off, and Techno nods. Tubbo’s eyes have started to sting again. He’s really sick of crying. “Tommy’s... he *can’t* be...”

“He’s dead,” Tubbo says, the words breaking as they leave him. Kristin is starting to cry, and that terrifies him. “He’s dead a-and he died *alone* and *scared* and-!”

“Tubbo!” Techno says, loud and worried, and Tubbo shakes his head.

“No! Tommy’s *dead*, he’s *gone*, and now that fucking-that *monster* has him!” he shouts, and Phil and Kristin look up at him, scared and lost-Kristin more so than Phil-and Tubbo bites down on his bottom lip *hard*. It keeps him from crying more, at least. “Automata... took him.”

“Automata knew who he was?” is the first thing out of Kristin’s mouth after Tubbo says that, and he freezes.

Well, *fuck*.

Techno seems to have the same thought as he does, because he immediately storms off somewhere, and Tubbo is left with a pair of grieving parents. What is he even supposed to say? How is he meant to apologize? He knows that Tommy’s death is by no means his fault-it’s Automata’s fault, the fucker, Tubbo wants to kill him, wants him to *suffer* the way he’s made Tommy suffer-but he still feels the need to say *something*.

He doesn’t know what to say.

It feels as though anything he *could* say has been said already.

“I’ll explain everything later, when I’m not-when things aren’t so-” Phil cuts himself off, clearly frustrated, and Kristin just nods numbly. Tubbo wants to go home. Tubbo wants to sleep for a year.

Tubbo wants to see Tommy again.

“Techno, what are you doing?” Kristin asks, voice thick with tears, and Tubbo turns to see Techno sticking a sword into the umbrella holder and propping a wooden board under the handle of the front door. He grunts noncommittally and starts boarding up the windows.

“What the fuck?” Tubbo asks, and Techno doesn’t acknowledge him, instead moving to the next window to board it up. “Techno, what the *fuck?!?*”

“If he knew it was Tommy, he knows where to find us,” Techno grits out, and Tubbo watches in stunned silence as Techno duct tapes a sword to the underside of the table in the hall. “So we need to be prepared. We need to be *safe*. I need to make sure he can’t get to anyone else.”

Tubbo gestures to the now-blocked front door. “Techno, how the fuck am I meant to go home-”

“You *won’t*,” Techno says, and he starts to move towards the living room. Tubbo stumbles to follow him. “Puffy will come here, you guys won’t go anywhere, and you’ll be *safe*.”

Techno puts another sword behind the couch. Tubbo huffs. “This isn’t going to stop him if he comes here-”

“I know that!” Techno snaps, then he pauses, taking a deep breath. “I know that. But I can’t just... sit by and do *nothing*, Tubbo, I-I can’t watch it happen to someone else.”

Tubbo steps back. He’s not about to stop Techno from comforting himself-albeit in the weirdest way Tubbo’s ever seen anyone cope-and he turns back to the hallway, surprised to see Phil standing in the doorway. He looks like a wreck. Tubbo’s pretty sure he feels like one too. God only knows Tubbo’s not any better off.

“I’m... I’m gonna make a cup of tea,” Phil says, voice trembling, and Tubbo gives him a sympathetic grimace. Kristin follows Phil into the kitchen soon after, and it’s not long before Tubbo starts hearing sobs from the other room.

Tubbo turns towards the stairs and wonders if he should go up there. It's likely that Tommy's room has gone completely untouched, and he's not sure if he's entirely ready to face the mechanical array of bullshit that's waiting. Tubbo's technology had failed him, had failed Tommy. He doesn't even want to *look* at another line of code for the next decade.

But he'd left Tommy's room an utter pigsty, and that just won't do.

Tubbo heads up the stairs, ignoring Techno's frantic fortifying and Phil and Kristin's cries of mourning. It's not as though he can offer them any kind of information or help, not in the state he's in, not in the state *they're* in. Tubbo feels dazed, feels numb and hollow and horrible, and he doesn't know what to do with himself.

And, as Tubbo stands in Tommy's bedroom for the first time in a good few hours, and it feels so much more real then. The bed is unmade, and Tommy is dead. The fans in the PC are whirring, and Tommy is dead. The window is open, and Tommy is dead.

The world should have stopped turning.

But it's the morning, and Tommy is still dead.

Tubbo sits on the floor in the middle of all the wiring, sighing as he looks up at the ceiling. "You are a *total* dick, y'know that?" he says, and he squints. "Should've told us you wanted to go outside, bossman. Wasn't very nice of you to go off and die alone."

There's no response. Tubbo wasn't expecting one anyway. If Tommy were here right now, he'd probably say some stupid shit like, "*Oh, but Tubbo, I didn't want you to watch me die!*" or "*Oh, but Tubbo, I wanted to see the stars, just one last time!*"

Tubbo wants to tell him that that's bullshit, but he can't, because Tommy is dead. Tubbo glances over at the discarded suit, at that *stupid* mask, and he picks it up, turning it over in his hands. If Tommy were here, he'd be teasing Tubbo for being sentimental. Tubbo is of the opinion that Tommy can go fuck himself.

As he looks down into the cartoonish white eyes of the suit, Tubbo

frowns. “‘With great power,’ huh?” he hums, grip on the mask tightening minutely. Tubbo’s scowl deepens. “It wasn’t *your* responsibility. Do the right thing, sure, go right the fuck ahead, but you didn’t have to get yourself killed in the process.”

If Tommy were here right now, he’d say something like, “*You just don’t understand it, Tubbo, this is what I have to do, it’s what I’m meant for. You just don’t understand.*”

“Then *help me* understand,” Tubbo pleads with an empty mask, “tell me what to *do*, tell me how to *help*, I’m your guy in the *chair*, dickhead, I’m not... you were never meant to *die!*”

And Tommy would probably groan all dramatically and lean all his weight onto Tubbo, which is annoying, given that he’s heavy as shit because of his superstrength. He’d say something so stupidly nice, “*Listen, Big T, you don’t have to like it, but it’s done with now. It’s over. Now you have to decide what to do,*” and then he would smile and get even more nice, “*You weren’t the follower, Tubbo, I was. You led me to victory in almost every fight I had. Gotta lead yourself now, big man.*”

Of course, Tubbo would tell him to quit with the self-effacing schtick, because it’s *Tommy* that’s doing the fighting, it’s *Tommy* that’s doing all of the heavy lifting, and it’s *Tommy* whose instincts Tubbo relies on to get him home safe.

But he can’t come home safe again.

Tubbo has to make a call here.

People will start putting pieces together if Spider-Man disappears on the same day Tommy had died. Tubbo knows the public-knows the *Internet*, actually-better than anyone. If this is the last time Spider-Man is seen, his legacy will be one of loss. One of failure. People will ignore the good done, *especially* if Schlatt starts to put his patented dickhead spin on things, and they’ll herald Spider-Man as a cautionary tale instead of what he is. A hero.

Tubbo can’t let that happen.

"I know what you're thinking," Techno says shakily from the doorway, and Tubbo jumps, startled out of his thoughts. Techno looks terrified, just as terrified as he'd looked when Tommy had told him what had been happening, and Tubbo feigns innocence. Techno narrows his eyes, unconvinced. "You've got that same look in your eye that he did when we tried to convince him to stop. You don't want this, Tubbo."

"You don't get to tell me what I want," Tubbo says, and Techno looks hurt, but he backs down. "I need to make sure he's... he gets remembered the way he deserves. We can't even give him a proper *burial*, Techno, we don't even have a *body*! Let me do this for him. *Please*."

Techno opens his mouth to protest, then freezes. "We don't have a body," he mutters, like he's realized something, and Tubbo's brow furrows.

"Yes, Techno, we don't have the dead body of your little brother and my best friend, this is an incredibly distressing thing," Tubbo says slowly, and Techno shakes his head.

"No, that's-well, yeah, that's accurate, but I'm-just come with me," he says, clearly exasperated by something, and Tubbo stands, setting Tommy's mask down gently on the bed before following Techno downstairs to the kitchen. Tubbo immediately winces; seeing Phil and Kristin crying will never get easier. Techno slams his hands on the table and gives them an apologetic look. "Sorry, I just-I realized something. I... I don't think Tommy's dead."

Tubbo feels his chest seize. Kristin and Phil both look up at Techno like a pair of deer in headlamps, and Phil's face is a mix of angry and sympathetic. "Tech, don't say shit like that. I know you're trying to cope right now, but y-you said-"

"I know! I know, it really... all of the evidence is *definitely* not in my favor here," Techno says, and Kristin turns her head, a hand clasped over her mouth as she gasps out a quiet sob. Tubbo doesn't know what the fuck is going through Techno's mind right now.

"Listen, I-I think you just need some time to process," Tubbo starts,

and Techno rounds on him, eyes wide and frantic for *someone* to believe him. Tubbo knows he shouldn't indulge denial, but... if it were Tubbo, he'd want someone to hear him out. Tubbo sighs. "What's your theory, bossman?"

Techno slides into one of the chairs at the kitchen table and takes one of Kristin's hands gently, brows furrowed. "I'm sorry we didn't... if there's anything I say that you need explained, just-you have to wait until I'm done, okay?" he says softly, and she looks up at him, eyes filled with tears and confusion. Techno swallows. "If I don't say it all in one go, I think I'm gonna lose my confidence here."

"Okay," Kristin agrees, voice more quiet than Tubbo's ever heard her, and Phil takes her other hand as he gives Techno a wary look.

Taking a deep breath, Techno sits back and folds his hands on the table in front of him. He doesn't look at any of them. Tubbo wonders why that is. "When Automata... took Tommy," he starts, and now Tubbo understands, "he said... he said that he was taking him 'home.' That he was taking his 'little brother' home. So... if Tommy's dead-dead for good-why would Automata need him? They've been... they were trying to take him in *alive* until now. So why would he take Tommy if he wasn't at least certain he'd be able to... to bring him back?"

Tubbo feels his stomach churn. "Oh my God," he whispers. Techno has a point. "When Tommy was-when he fought Automata yesterday, Automata was-he was so *creepy*, but I didn't-I was too focused on the fact he'd said there was cyanide, but he... he asked Tommy if he felt special. As if it was... a *gift*."

Phil is pale. Kristin is trembling. Techno lets go of Kristin's hand to grab Tubbo's arm. "A normal person can typically be dead for up to half an hour before resuscitation is impossible," he whispers, and Tubbo swallows bile.

"S-So that means... whatever it is that Automata needed him for, he needed to get to him as soon as possible after he died," Tubbo says. "A-And he knew who Tommy was, h-he must've figured out his identity somehow, but I was so *careful*, I even came up with an algorithm to erase Tommy's face from any and all CCTV footage!

He's practically undetectable!"

"How he figured it out doesn't matter right now," Techno says carefully. "What matters is that whatever it is that he has planned for Tommy, it's ready, and he got impatient enough to... do what he did. Can't do anything to a corpse. God only knows what kind of stuff Automata has access to. And we know that before now, Automata wanted him brought in *alive*."

"For whatever it is Automata's planning-the Guided Evolution project, most likely-Tommy's gotta be alive," Tubbo whispers. "Holy fucking shit."

The four of them sit in stunned silence.

Then, Kristin wipes her tears and looks to Techno and Tubbo with a determined glint in her eyes. "So we file a missing persons report," she says, standing slowly and placing both hands on the table in a manner that's surprisingly intimidating.

"Wh-but what do we do now? Tommy's not dead, he can't be for whatever that bastard's got planned, so... where does that leave us?" Phil asks, helpless.

"We start planning," Kristin says, terrifyingly calm, "and we get our fucking kid back."

There's hope!!!

Wonderful, wonderful art that has been bestowed upon me since the last chapter:

[These](#) lovely drawings, the one with Tommy looking at the stars makes my heart hurt in the best of ways ;-;

[This](#) amazing art of Spider-Tommy!! The pose is so cool :D

[This](#) super cool gif of Slime!! The pixel art style is awesome :)

500 (?)

Chapter 60: 500 (?)

A return to The In-Between.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The Keeper has never felt devastation like this before.

He's felt devastation, of course, knows it intimately, but not like this.

He'd just been talking with 498 and 499 when the feeling of a new presence in The In-Between had hit him. His physical form had been asleep. Something had happened in the five hundredth timeline. The timeline he thought he'd been doing well in.

"Mr. Keeper? What's wrong?" 499 asks him, and The Keeper smiles shakily, eyes locking with 498's. 498's brows furrow, and as The Keeper nods subtly towards 499, 498's confusion turns to realization, and he scoops the little one into his arms. 499, of course, is not pleased. "Wh-hey! Put me down, Eight!"

"I know, I'm sorry, but let's, um... let's hang back. Just for a second, okay?" 498 says gently, and while 499 is still pouting, the two seem to have a mutual understanding.

"Did you get scared again?" 499 whispers, but given that he's so young, his volume control isn't the best, and The Keeper can hear him even as 498 starts to walk in a different direction.

498 hums. "Something like that," he murmurs, and he sets 499 on the ground, gently taking his hand. "Here, let's take a walk, Nines. Mr. Keeper has to handle something important."

The Keeper turns his attention towards the direction of the new presence. He finds himself filled with dread as he walks down the long expanse of The In-Between. "Hello? Is anyone even *here*? It's so empty," someone mutters, a certain Catalyst, to be exact, and while The Keeper grieves-by the *gods* does he grieve-there's something almost relieving about the familiarity of this Catalyst. He feels a bit guilty, but it's nice to have someone to regularly talk to that isn't numbed by eons of boredom, horrifically traumatized to the point of being unrecognizable, or a literal toddler. The new Catalyst tilts his head. "Karl? The fuck are *you* doing here, big man?"

"Tommy!" he says, throwing his arms wide open, and while The Catalyst is still confused, he does give The Keeper a brief hug. "God, it is... so *not* good to see you."

"Well, fuck you too, I guess," The Catalyst laughs, bewildered as he pulls away. The Keeper shakes his head fervently, as if he's capable of clearing his thoughts away by doing so. The Catalyst gives him a curious look. "Uh... not to ruin the mood of whatever breakdown you're having, but... where are we?"

The Keeper clears his throat. "Um, first things first, what's the last thing you remember?" he asks. Might as well try a new method with Catalyst number five hundred; he still has trouble falling asleep with 499's terrified sobs echoing in his mind.

The Catalyst gives him an odd look, and he squints. "That depends," he says, clearly unsure, and The Keeper smiles tiredly, "is this, like, a split-second thing that I'm dreaming of as I'm dying? Or are you *actually* Karl?"

"Okay, so you know you're dead, that's good," The Keeper mumbles, cupping his chin with a hand and frowning thoughtfully. "How do I put this... Tommy, you-"

"Mr. Keeper! We heard a voice that wasn't yours!" 499 sing-songs from a little ways away, and The Keeper freezes. Oh, *shit*. What's he supposed to do? 498 and 499 stop-well, 498 stops, but 499's footsteps just get faster, pitter-pattering as he runs up behind The Keeper and clings to the backs of his legs, staring up with wide, amazed eyes at the newest Catalyst. "Ah! You're me! Us! I think

so...?"

The Catalyst-500-blinks. "You look like me, but, like, an actual child," he says, and 499 nods enthusiastically. The Keeper absentmindedly runs a gentle hand through 499's curls, and 500 crosses his arms. "Uh, Karl, would you care to explain?"

"Right, so... you knew me as Karl. On the physical plane. But I'm... I am The Keeper, and I'm in charge of keeping this reality intact," he says, and 500 blinks at him. "You're dead. These two are... other versions of you that have died. There are others, but, um... you can't see them, I'm assuming."

500 glances around. "Ah, nope," he says, popping the plosive, and his eyes lock onto 498's shell-shocked form. 500 snorts. "Well, *you* look like shit. Fuck happened to you, big man? Or should I-you're me, right? So... what the fuck happened?"

498 says nothing. It's as if he's seen a ghost. The Keeper supposes that he has, in a way. The Keeper steps forward and clears his throat. "Let's... not get into that," he says softly, "it's a bit of a sensitive subject."

"Oh, shit, yeah, that's-sorry... me?... that's my bad," 500 says, and 498 remains unresponsive. Of course, this is concerning to The Keeper, but he needs to focus on finding out what went wrong with 500. Eyeing The Keeper warily, 500 makes a face. "So you're, like, a god? Like, a *time god*?"

The Keeper shakes his head. "No, nothing like that. I'm just in charge of maintaining the different timelines of this reality. I'm... I'm supposed to be protecting you," he admits, "and I'm apparently not very good at it. I really am sorry, but you're stuck here until I can figure out a way to keep at least one timeline steady."

500 shrugs. "Don't beat yourself up over it. It's probably gotta be hard," he says, and The Keeper finds it odd that 500 is the one doing the comforting here. 500 shifts uneasily from foot to foot, a habit that The Keeper knows one of his brothers has as well. "Do you... know about the whole...?"

"The Spider-Man thing? Yeah, I know about it," The Keeper says, slightly amused, and 500 lets out a bewildered laugh. The Keeper grimaces. "I, uh, would've helped out more, but The Rules don't let me interfere directly. I guess it wasn't enough this time either."

"Does this mean that Ten is gonna stay here with us?" 499 asks, and The Keeper jumps a bit, startled at the reminder of the little one's presence. At everyone's visible confusion towards the nickname, 499 puffs out his cheeks, his tiny face a bit pink with embarrassment. "Well, Nines calls me Eight, and Eight-Nines-Five isn't how the numbers go. So it should be Eight-Nines-Ten!"

"I've died *ten times*?" 500 asks, aghast, and The Keeper winces.

"Um... more times than that," he says gently, because the only one that's ever really taken the news well of just how many Catalysts are dead has been 498, and 498 is still relatively catatonic right now. The Keeper hurries to distract 500. "So, this is Eight and Nines, you three should get acquainted. Until I can find a timeline that works, you'll be in each other's company for the foreseeable future."

500 nods easily, then his shoulders start to fall slowly, and the recognition in his eyes at The Keeper's face slips away. He looks down at the little one, then at 498. "I-I'm sorry, I don't think I... do I know you?" he asks, blinking rapidly.

The Keeper doesn't know what to say to that. "No," 498 whispers, but it's not a response to 500's odd question. "Please, no. Not again."

In spite of 498's reaction, The Keeper tries to maintain a bright smile. "Well, of course you do, Tommy, i-it's me, it's Karl, don't you... remember?" he asks.

500 glances around, then points to himself hesitantly. "Am-is my name Tommy? Are you talking to me?" he asks, wary, and 498 inhales sharply.

"Yeah, o-of course I'm talking to you, who else would I be talking to?" The Keeper asks, rather frantic now, and 500 takes an uneasy step back.

"I-I don't know you. Who are you? A-And where am I? *Who* am I?" 500 asks, sounding panicked, and as The Keeper steps forward, hand slightly outstretched. 500 just stumbles back further, fully in the midst of an anxiety attack now. His eyes meet The Keeper's. "Why can't I remember?"

The Keeper rushes forward, sensing something, sensing something *terrible*, and just as his fingertips are about to touch 500's shoulder, 500 vanishes.

The first thing to break him out of his shock is 499's quiet sniffing.

The Keeper turns around and scoops 499 up. "What happened? Where did he go?" 499 asks, and The Keeper honestly doesn't know how to answer that. "Is he gone forever?"

"Not forever, no," The Keeper says as soothingly as he can. "He's okay. The only time people leave The In-Between is... is if..."

He trails off then, because the implications of that are terrifying. The only time someone leaves the In-Between is if they've been resuscitated, or if their soul has been destroyed. The Keeper had sent Phil back successfully-he might get into trouble for it, but it had seemed more than worth it at the time-but he hadn't sent 500 back. Not intentionally.

He couldn't, not under those circumstances, even if he'd tried.

The Keeper looks to 498, who has a mixture of terror and determination on his face, and 498 swallows, even though he doesn't need to. "He's been revived," 498 says, and The Keeper blinks in surprise. "It was... i-it was like I was looking in a mirror."

"What? What d'you mean?" The Keeper asks, shifting 499 in his arms, and 498's hands have started to shake. The Keeper looks between 498 and 499, and 498 wraps his arms around himself uneasily. The Keeper sets 499 down and conjures a piece of paper and a pen. "Here, Nines, why don't you go practice your letters some more? Eight and I are gonna talk for a little."

499 looks at 498, tiny brows furrowed in determination as he wraps

his little hand around two of 498's fingers. "I'm here, Eight," he says quietly, "you don't gotta be scared. I can hold your hand, okay?"

For a brief moment, 498 breaks away from the panic, and he smiles gently at 499. "Don't worry about me so much, Nines. I'll be okay," he says, and he crouches down to be at 499's eye level, taking both of his hands and squeezing them softly. "You can probably do the whole alphabet *twice* before me and Mr. Keeper are done. D'you think you can do that? You can show me after and everything!"

499 still seems unsure, but he nods and jumps up a little to give 498 a hug. "Come get me if you feel scared again," he whispers in that too-loud way, and The Keeper watches as 498 struggles to hide his smile.

499 takes the paper and pen and toddles off, far enough to give them privacy but close enough to be called if he's needed. The Keeper thinks the little one's insightfulness is a wonder. 498 stands again and turns to him, shoulders tense and expression wary as he wraps his arms around his torso once again.

"When you said it was like looking in a mirror," The Keeper says gently, because he doesn't want to frighten 498, "what did you mean by that?"

As he finishes his question, 498's face falls. "Because it was me," he says. "It's exactly what happened to me, I-I remember it now, it's exactly what I looked like, what I *felt* like, before... before it happened."

The Keeper steps forward slowly, hesitantly, so as to not startle 498 any more than he already is, and 498's arms get a little tighter around himself. "Eight, *please*, anything you tell me-the more details, the better. It's okay if you can't do it," he adds, because he doesn't want 498 to feel unsafe, it's the *last* thing he wants. "But if you can talk about it, please do. It could help him."

"I-I want to help," 498 says, as firmly as he can, and The Keeper nods. He waits. He has no doubt that whatever had happened to 498 is likely incredibly traumatic, and while the clock might be ticking, he's not about to rush a scarred Catalyst. "I... I forgot

everything too. I must've been here before-maybe it was when you weren't here, it had to be-because I... I *died*. He killed me, he did, a-and-!"

498 breaks off into a shaking gasp, and The Keeper rushes to his side, hands outstretched but hesitant. 498 curls into himself and shakes his head, his eyes squeezed shut. The Keeper rests a hand gently on his back, and 498 flinches violently. "I'm sorry," The Keeper says quietly, and 498 shakes his head again. "You don't have to keep going if you can't-"

"I can do it, I-I *can*, I want-I wanna help him," 498 says, voice shaking, and The Keeper's heart aches for him. 498 has that look again, that terrified and determined look, and The Keeper gives him a moment to collect himself. 498 takes a deep breath. "He killed me before I killed myself. That's... that's what I was trying to say. I-I remember it now, I remember showing up here once a-and then I... fuck... I lost my memory."

"What?" The Keeper whispers, bewildered, and 498 nods.

"That *thing*, that *thing* that he's got, i-it... he always rambled about perfecting it, making sure it would work properly. He told me it was convenient that it got rid of my memory-told me that towards the end, after I started remembering, even if I never remembered properly, I remembered enough," 498 rambles, picking at his nails. The Keeper frowns. "It's happening to Ten, it's happening to him, too, he's-that *thing* is gonna erase his memory, a-and he's gonna be in that *place*, I-I can't-!"

498 cuts himself off again, and The Keeper rubs small circles between his shoulders, trying hard not to panic. Someone needs to stay calm, someone needs to remain clear-headed, and if 498 is struggling, it's going to have to be The Keeper. "What happens in... in that place?" The Keeper asks, slow and quiet, and 498's eyes are as fearful as a wild animal trapped in a cage.

"It's horrible," he whispers, "the facility is horrible. H-He's gonna think it's fine, gonna think that they're trying to *help*, but they're not, h-he's not *sick*, he's not, Mr. Keeper, he's *not!*"

"O-Okay," The Keeper agrees quickly, though he has no clue what 498 is talking about, "I believe you. He's not sick. I believe you."

498 murmurs something to himself, eyes still wild. The Keeper's never seen him like this before, so gut-wrenchingly terrified. 498 tugs at the ends of his hair idly, like he's not aware of his actions, eyes shut. "They're gonna take away his senses," he mumbles, "gonna blind him."

"Blind him?" The Keeper asks, horrified, and 498 hurries to correct himself, tugging a little harder at the ends of his hair.

"N-Not permanent, it's not... not permanent. Just a blindfold," 498 says, and The Keeper continues the small comforting gestures, the gentle circles. 498 rocks back and forth once on his heels, eyes still shut like he thinks that's going to help him remember. "The spiders are the worst part."

That's... not good.

"How can I help him?" The Keeper asks, quiet but firm, and 498 winces.

His eyes open again, that dull grey, and The Keeper resists the urge to flinch away at the steely blankness there. 498 is no longer in The In-Between, not mentally, he's back at the place he's trying to describe. "He's a sick bastard. Ten is... he wants Ten to be his little brother, he's gonna make him play family, like it's some sick game, gonna make him dependent," 498 mutters, hands opening and closing like he's trying to grasp at the memory. "If Ten is disobedient, Ten gets punished. If *Mum* is disobedient, Ten gets punished. The rules don't make sense. He has to follow the rules. Sometimes the rules change. Sometimes the doctors make the rules change."

"The doctors?" The Keeper asks. He's never heard any Catalyst talk like this before, this timid rambling, these stuttered statements. It sounds as if The Atrocity views wherever this is as a dollhouse, as if he can manipulate The Catalyst and whoever it is playing the role of the mother for his own sick game. Like they're puppets.

498 squeezes his eyes shut again, the lines at the corners of them appearing and disappearing, as if he's blinking with his eyes closed. "Mhm, mhm, the doctors. Some of them are nice. Some of them are mean. They test lots of things, but he wants to know about regeneration. He keeps testing regeneration," 498 whispers, voice stuttering and shaking, and The Keeper freezes. This sounds... bad. 498 starts to pick at his nails again. "The pain doesn't stop, Mr. Keeper, he won't let it. It's *torture*, Mr. Keeper."

"How long were you there for?" The Keeper asks, his own voice almost as weak as 498's.

498 opens his eyes again, brows furrowed as he looks down on his hands. "A year...? O-Or was it... nine months? Eleven? Six?" he mutters, like he's trying to figure something out. He looks up at The Keeper then, eyes glassy. "Time is different there. He *makes* it different. Tells you lies. A day in there is-is it four hours or six? I-I can't remember, Mr. Keeper, I'm sorry, m'sorry, I-I-"

"You have nothing to be sorry for," The Keeper assures him, and 498 makes a face, shoulders hunching up by his ears. The Keeper wonders what he could say to comfort this poor Catalyst, this terribly traumatized kid. "You're safe here, he can't hurt you anymore."

498 looks at him, more furious than The Keeper's ever seen him, more like himself than The Keeper's ever seen him. "No! He *can* hurt me! He can *always* hurt me. H-He gets in your head, makes you think you *need* him, and he never goes away, he-!" 498 cuts himself off yet again, scrubbing the heels of his palms over his face. "He's gonna do it to Ten, you can't-you have to save him, Mr. Keeper, *please*. It's... it's *so bad* in there."

"I-I can't do anything directly," The Keeper says, a scared confession, and the slow-dawning horror on 498's face is enough to make him regret what he's just said. "Eight, there are *Rules*-"

"*Fuck* your rules!" 498 snaps. "He's about to be *tortured*, and you're giving me shit about *Rules*?!"

"You don't understand, it's cosmic-level-"

"So tell me, then! Tell me what's so important that you can't get off your ass and save him!" 498 demands, and The Keeper is taken aback a bit. He's seen this before, The Catalyst pushing past his own terror and trauma to fight on behalf of someone he thinks needs it more than he needs to keep himself safe. 498 narrows his eyes. "Go on. Tell me."

The Keeper takes a deep breath. There aren't any Rules regarding whether or not it's acceptable to explain universal phenomena to Catalysts that have died. "The Rules are in place so that the fabric of this reality doesn't fall apart," he says calmly, and 498's anger fades, becomes faint so quickly that The Keeper worries over it. "Ten-The Catalyst-I'm doing everything in my power to make sure he stays safe and alive. *Clearly* it hasn't worked out well yet, but this timeline is different, it's *better*. There's *hope*, Eight."

"Not if what happened to me happens to him," 498 says, voice shaking. Some of the fight has come back to him. The Keeper is saddened by how little fight there is. "That shit-it makes you someone else. You don't *get* to come back from that."

"I understand your concern-"

"Who's The Atrocity? Is it him? Is it Dream?" 498 asks, sounding as though he's trying very hard to be confident, as though his confidence will disappear if he doesn't get it out as soon as possible. "I hear you sometimes. Mumbling about it."

The Keeper knows that he shouldn't feel so apprehensive about answering, but he can't help it; this isn't exactly the easiest subject to breach. "The Atrocity is... a cosmic force. It looks to destroy realities, to leave them as chaotic and mutilated as possible," he says.

498's brows furrow, and he glances over at 499. "So... what does that have to do with us?" he asks, and The Keeper frowns, wondering how to explain it.

"You... the others... you could-hypothetically speaking-go undetected, fulfill your purpose in a reality without The Atrocity even noticing, but... The Atrocity likes to chase The Catalyst," he says,

and 498 looks even more confused. The Keeper tuts. "Think of it like... a chess game, but one team only has a king and a queen."

"I'm not very good at chess," 498 mumbles, but he nods for The Keeper to go on anyway.

The Keeper conjures a chessboard, discarding most of one team's pieces until there's just a king and a queen remaining. "See, The Atrocity picks out its main host, and that's The Atrocity's queen," he says, and the queen piece lights up gently. "The queen's the—"

"The best one, I know," 498 says, too wrapped up in his confusion and frustration to fall back into his pattern of endlessly apologizing.

The Keeper gives him a hesitant smile, and he lights up the other pieces in the back row. "These ones are The Abominations. The Atrocity, long ago, found a large swathe of souls across many realities to corrupt and twist to fit its purposes," he explains, and the six pieces glow red.

498 seems a bit perturbed at that, and he scowls. "Seems like the deck's stacked against us," he murmurs, hesitantly reaching out to touch a single fingertip to the queen piece on the opposite side. "This seems unfair."

Tilting his head in acknowledgement, The Keeper hums. "Well, yes, but universal dealings are never easy, nor are they simple enough to explain with a game of chess," he says, chuckling a bit to himself. He points to the queen piece that represents The Catalyst's vessel. "The Catalyst gives its vessels a sort of... karmic power, though. See, it likes to choose the kindest souls, the ones with the biggest hearts. Metaphorically speaking, of course."

"Kind souls? And The Catalyst-that fucker's putting us through *this*?" 498 asks, gesturing to the emptiness of The In-Between, and The Keeper gives him a sad smile.

"Well, souls like yours are the only ones compatible enough with The Catalyst's universal balance. See, if a Catalyst manages to... well, *catalyze* one of The Abominations," he says, and he takes three of the six side pieces and sends them to the side of The

Catalyst, making them glow a soft blue instead of a harsh red, “then The Abomination in question becomes a Reformed. That’s the game. That’s the point of the chase. The Catalyst won’t stop until The Abominations are defeated-whether that means defeating them or Reforming them, though it prefers to Reform-and The Atrocity won’t stop until every reality is in shambles.”

498 stares down at the pieces, and he touches the queen again. “That’s a lot of responsibility to put on one soul,” he says, soft and tired, and The Keeper’s chest aches. He wants to comfort 498, to tell him that it’ll be okay, but he can’t guarantee anything.

He knows that other Keepers have had to collapse entire realities to keep The Atrocity from destroying them first, after all.

“The Catalyst only has one choice. One soul in each universe that’s destined to change it, at whatever place in space-time that The Catalyst and The Atrocity arrive. Um... it’s a lot, yes, but while The Atrocity can pick anyone-doom them from the start-The Catalyst has to pick the only soul suited for the job. I promise it’s not this bad in most realities,” The Keeper says, and 498 gives him a shaky smile. “It’s a lot of responsibility in *this* reality, yeah, but... in others, it’s easier. In others, there’s a better life for The Catalyst-an easier one, at least.”

498 takes hold of the queen piece and frowns thoughtfully. “So, what, we just... we get fucked over by the universe, world on our shoulders, and we’re supposed to... be *fine* with that?” he asks, and The Keeper sighs. 498 shakes his head. “N-No, no, *fuck* that. Screw your cosmic destiny *bullshit*, man, I’m-! We’re *kids*!”

“I know,” The Keeper says, “I’m sorry.”

“And now, the same shit that happened to me is about to happen to him! Do you have any *idea* what it’s like to be tortured?! Legitimately *tortured*?! Because I do!” 498 bellows, grabbing The Keeper by the front of his shirt and shaking him. He’s surprisingly strong, and while The Keeper knows there is no danger to his life in The In-Between, the terrified, wild look in 498’s eyes is enough to shock him to his very core. “Do you’ve any idea what it’s like to have your body stitch itself back up *over* and *over* again, only to be torn apart again for

some sick *bastard* and his shitty *experiments*?! And you cosmic fuckers are just gonna let that *happen*?! Where the *fuck* do you get off, huh?! Fuck you! Fuck you and fuck fate!"

498's touch makes the hairs on The Keeper's arms raise with static, and The Keeper's eyes widen, only to be abruptly shut as he's ripped away from The In-Between.

Karl Jacobs wakes up in a cold sweat.

There are hands on his arm.

"Oh my God, Karl, what the fuck is going on?" Quackity asks, crouched beside the bed, and Karl's eyes widen. Sapnap rushes in, and Karl squints as light fills the room. Quackity brushes hair away from his face, brows furrowed. "You were... you were crying in your sleep, man, seriously, what the hell is happening?"

"What's... what day is it?" Karl asks instead, swallowing. His throat feels hoarse, and he knows he must've been more than crying.

"Uh... Wednesday?" Sapnap says, then he frowns. "Well, I guess it's Thursday now."

"We were talking about, uh, that one thing when we heard you yell out," Quackity says, looking uncomfortable. Karl knows why, knows that Sapnap is probably telling him about what had happened to Tommy. Not that either of them know it's Tommy that had gotten killed-and evidently resuscitated, given that Karl is back in the same timeline-but still. Quackity lifts a hand to Karl's forehead, and Sapnap gives his ankle a light squeeze. "You're burning up. I'm gonna get you an ice pack."

"No, don't... don't bother, Q, I'm fine," Karl says, waving him off. "I... you guys should... you should get to bed, I-I think I'm gonna stay up a little while longer."

He's got things to do, after all.

Uh oh, this can't be good!

Go check out [this absolutely incredible art](#) of Techno and Tubbo in chapter 59, it's legitimately so heart-wrenching and I love it so much

awakening

Chapter 61: awakening

Someone wakes up.

CW: manipulation

Kind of?

Definitely not gonna be the worst of it, but just in case.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

His eyes blink open.

The first thing he registers is that the room he's in resembles a hospital.

The second thing he registers is that he remembers what hospitals are, but he doesn't remember what his name is.

That's... weird.

"Oh, thank God, you're awake!" someone to his left says, clearly relieved. The lights are turned very low. There's rhythmic beeping. Is that his heart? Is he in the hospital? No, no, this is more like a lab. Like the kind you'd see in movies. What movies has he watched? The person beside him clamps a hand over his, and he startles a little. "I've been so worried about you! The least you could do is apologize for giving me such a scare!"

"What...? Sorry," he mumbles, but he still has no idea what's going on. He looks around; he's having a hard time adjusting to the light. "Where... am I?"

"You're... here. With me," is the vague answer from the person on his left, and he shifts so that he's sitting up properly. The person to his left pushes him back down almost immediately. "Hey, hey, don't strain yourself, dumbass. The doctors thought it'd be good if you weren't crowded by so many people when you woke up."

He stifles a yawn and squints at the vague outline of the person's silhouette. "Right, um... and you're...?" he trails off, and the person leans forward. The man's face is half-covered by a white mask, and there's something unsettling about his eyes. They're very green. He winces and gives the man what he hopes comes across as an apologetic smile. "S-Sorry, I don't-I can't really seem to remember... anything."

"Curious," the man mumbles. Shaking his head, the man's eyes crinkle up at the corners. "I'm your big brother, obviously. You really... forgot about me?"

The man-his brother, yes, that sounds right, he feels like he has a brother-sounds quite sad about it. "Sorry," he mumbles again, "but to be fair, I-I can't even remember my *own* name."

His brother tilts his head. "Well, if you really forgot *that* much... my name is Dream," Dream says, and he nods, "and you're... Theseus."

It sounds odd, like he'd had to think about it. But what the hell does Theseus know? He doesn't remember anything, after all. "Right. Dream. You're my brother. And I'm Theseus," he repeats, and there's something off about the name. It feels odd to say it's his. Theseus thinks nothing of it, though. His memory is gone, that's probably it, he's just not used to it. Theseus glances around at the sterile-looking room-the small portion of it he can see in the dim lighting-and he makes a face. "What happened to me? Why can't I...?"

Dream gives him what Theseus is pretty certain is a sad look. "You were in an accident. It must've affected your memory pretty badly if

you can't even remember *me*," he says, and Theseus looks back at him, blinking curiously. Dream's eyes crinkle at the corners again. The little gesture is nice-comforting, even-but something's at the back of Theseus's mind, telling him not to trust the expression. It's probably just paranoia. Dream looks down to Theseus's hand, brows furrowing at the IV needle poking into his skin. "You know, Theseus, you really have to stop going outside, especially in your condition. You *know* how fragile you are. Someone could've hurt you, and then what would I have done?"

"Sorry," Theseus says, and he's not really sure why he's apologizing. He's got no clue what Dream's on about, after all. "But I honestly don't know what you're talking about, man. I can't possibly be sick, I feel fine. Other than the memory thing, but that's... probably from the, uh-the accident, right?"

Dream rolls his eyes and huffs. "God, you're so stupid," he says, and Theseus wonders if that's just brotherly teasing. Something at the back of his mind tells him that it's not, but Theseus isn't sure why. "*Obviously* you feel fine. You're just used to being sick. You're used to feeling awful, so feeling awful probably just feels normal to you. You look ill. You look awful. You *are* sick."

Oh. Theseus blinks. "Um. Right, you... you're probably right. That's a good point," he says, and maybe he really *is* sick. Dream has no reason to lie to him. "What's... am I not well *mentally* or... is it a physical thing?"

For a moment, Theseus wonders if Dream is going to answer. It's like he's debating on how to phrase it. "Mostly physical," he says after a moment's deliberation, "but sometimes, if you're having a really bad flare-up, you'll start saying things that don't make any sense. *Thinking* things that don't make any sense. It's like your sickness thinks everyone's gonna hurt you. You scare me when that happens, y'know."

Theseus feels like he has to apologize, but surely he doesn't. If he really *is* sick, he can't exactly help it. "Sorry," he says anyway, "I don't mean to scare you."

Dream's eyes crinkle at the corners again. "That's alright. I know you

don't mean to, but it's good that you're apologizing. I appreciate it," he says, and Theseus nods uneasily. Dream straightens up a little at a knock on the door, and he grabs something from the little side table next to Theseus's hospital bed. "Oh, here, let me get your blindfold on."

"My what?" Theseus asks, bewildered laughter lacing it, and Dream crosses his arms.

"Your eyes are *sensitive*, Theseus. I don't even know how badly they might've gotten hurt in the accident, and now you're refusing to put it on? It's for *your* protection while the doctors have the lights on to perform all sorts of tests," Dream tells him, and Theseus feels a bit bad now. "I'm just trying to look out for you, and you're acting like this? *Laughing* at me?"

"No, no, I'm... I didn't know, I'm sorry, I'll wear it," Theseus says, because that's fair, honestly, he really *doesn't* know how bad it could be for him, and Dream's trying to help. This must be stressful for him, after all, so if he's being a bit short, it makes sense. Dream fastens the blindfold on, and Theseus winces at how tightly he snaps the buckle. "Ow, *careful*."

"Quit being such a baby," Dream says fondly, swatting the top of his head lightly. Theseus feels odd now, just staring into black fabric. It feels unsettling to have an entire sense taken away, but he's here, some doctors are gonna come in, and his brother's right next to him. Dream's hand rests on his shoulder, and Theseus jumps a little. "Oh, c'mon, now you're *flinching*? What did I do, Theseus, I mean, *seriously*?"

"What? No, it's not *you*, I'm just... not used to not being able to see," Theseus mutters, feeling a little silly for it, considering that apparently, he's *very* used to not seeing. "I'm sorry, Dream, this is just... a lot to take in. I'm so sick I can't even look at lit-up rooms...?"

Dream's hand squeezes his shoulder a bit *too* hard. Or maybe Theseus's muscles are affected by whatever sickness he's got. That's probably it. "You shouldn't have even been outside, Theseus, you *know* how fragile your immune system... ugh, well, *now* you don't know, but you *did*, and you didn't listen to me, and now you

can't remember anything," he says, clearly exasperated, and Theseus frowns.

"I'm sorry, Dream, I... clearly, whatever happened to me was bad, but I genuinely don't know what it is I did," he says, "I don't remember *anything*."

The hand on his shoulder disappears. Theseus misses it already. He must be a very tactile person. Dream sighs. "I know, it's not-well, technically it *is* your fault, but there's nothing to be done about it now, I suppose," he says, and Theseus runs his hands absentmindedly across the seam of the bedsheet. It's just to have something to do with his hands, just something to use his energy up on, but Dream swats at his hand suddenly. "Don't do that. Stay still. Do you want to give the doctors a hard time dealing with you? Is that what you want?"

"No," Theseus mumbles, and idly, he thinks that Dream is kind of a dick. Then again, he supposes that most older brothers are dicks. "I'll keep still."

"Good. You're enough of a handful for the doctors as it is," Dream chuckles, and his hand ruffles through Theseus's hair. "I'll tell them to come back in."

By the sound of it, he's walked over to the door. Theseus sits quietly. He's bored. He kinda wants something to eat. Why's he so hungry? That's weird. This whole... thing... feels weird. Something feels wrong, feels off. To be fair, he's just been in some kind of accident. That's probably why it feels like that. Probably.

Theseus isn't exactly adept at telling how many people are entering a room just by the sound of their footsteps, but he'd say there's at least two more people in the room other than Dream, and there's a creak of the chair next to him. Theseus jumps a little at the cold feeling of something being strapped to his wrist.

"Sorry," he says with a bit of a laugh, and Dream-presumably Dream, probably Dream-puts a hand on his arm, squeezing it in warning. "I'll keep still, I will, it just... startled me, that's all."

"It's Dr. Ponk, he's just testing your blood pressure, stop being dramatic," Dream tells him, and Theseus smiles apologetically at no one in particular. Presumably, this doctor-Dr. Ponk-is the one putting the blood pressure cuff on him, and his hands are weirdly shaky. Dream tuts worriedly-or maybe he's annoyed?-after a moment. "Ponk, what are you doing?"

There's a quiet swear to Theseus's right. "My bad, man, I'm... just give me a second, I'm not used to taking the blood pressure of someone with his... condition," Dr. Ponk says, and Theseus wonders if his sickness is fucked-up blood pressure. He's pretty sure that someone-he doesn't remember who, obviously-had explained it to him once; it's called hypertension or something. He remembers a smug grin, like whoever was explaining it had been a little shit that had gotten a kick out of using way-too-big words. Probably Dream, then.

Dream's grip on Theseus's arm tightens slightly. "Tell me, Ponk, how's Sam doing?" he asks, and there's an underlying tone there, something Theseus doesn't quite understand. Dream seems rather stressed. Ponk hesitates. Dream sighs. "Just... get it done. Don't you think my poor brother's been through enough today? Such a horrible accident..."

He trails off, brushing some of Theseus's hair away from his face. Theseus appreciates that; by the feel of it, his hair's pretty long, and he needs to keep still so that Ponk can do his job, so he can't move it himself. "Yes, it's... a miracle he's alright," Ponk agrees quietly. Theseus turns his head slightly towards the source of Ponk's voice in alarm, and Ponk laughs. "Nah, I'm, uh, pretty sure your brother wouldn't have let anything *too* bad happen to you, kid."

"He's got amnesia," Dream says, and Theseus thinks he doesn't sound all that torn up about it, but maybe he's just being clinical for the doctor's sake. "He couldn't even remember his own name. Is that... going to last?"

There's a carefully measured tone to his words, and Theseus gives Dream what he hopes comes across as a reassuring smile. It's really sweet of Dream to try and keep it together for his sake, but Theseus will be okay.

Ponk just sighs. "With amnesia," he starts gently, as if he's trying to break some bad news, "it would be nearly impossible to predict an outcome without multiple tests and brain scans, not to mention—"

"So we'll do those. I need to know if the amnesia's permanent," Dream says firmly. Ponk just goes back to taking Theseus's blood pressure.

Someone else in the room speaks up. "Have you gotten his written consent for the... specialized treatments?" the voice asks, and Dream's grip on him tightens more. Theseus winces. Dream lets go of him.

"Specialized treatments?" Theseus asks, brows furrowed and eyes wide, even though it makes no difference. It's not like he can see. "What does *that* mean?"

Dream chuckles a bit. "Theseus, there aren't many... options for you. So, we could do these treatments, these tests, and they could make you better," he says gently. Theseus wonders what the hell kind of condition he must have in order to even be considering this shit. Dream's hand rests over his own, and Dream squeezes it gently, careful not to jostle the IV too much. "I want you to get better. Don't you want that? Don't you want to get better?"

"Well, yeah, I-I guess so," Theseus says, and Dream's hand disappears from his, and there's footsteps, then more footsteps, then the chair creaks again slightly. Ponk has moved on to using his stethoscope on Theseus's chest, mumbling quiet warnings when the cold metal is about to touch him.

"Here," Dream says, pushing a pen into Theseus's right hand and yanking it over to rest on a clipboard. Someone sticks the tip of his finger with a needle, and someone else starts to draw blood from his left arm. "Ordinarily, I'd be able to sign *for* you, but... y'know. Legal technicalities, semantics, things like that."

"Shouldn't I... be able to see what I'm signing?" Theseus asks hesitantly. Ponk freezes. Dream is silent. The room feels tense. Theseus feels like he's said something wrong.

Dream's hand leaves his wrist. "Do you think I'd let you sign anything that wasn't in your best interest? You're my little brother, Theseus," he says, and he sounds hurt. Right. Obviously.

Theseus starts to sign his name. "For legal reasons," Ponk says quickly, "I think he does actually need to see what he's signing. Might not hold up if he doesn't."

Theseus hesitates. Dream grabs the clipboard, and there's a pair of heels clacking towards the other end of the room. After a moment, Dream lifts the blindfold carefully and points down at the paper. Theseus squints, but it's really hard to see any of the words. He catches a few like *autonomy* and *risk* but not much else, given that Dream yanks his chin up so that their eyes meet.

"Saw it? Good. Sign it," he says snappishly, and Theseus blinks at him. Dream lets go of him and rubs a hand over his own face—well, what little of it that isn't covered—and sighs. "I don't mean to lash out at you, Theseus, really, I'm just... this is so *stressful* for me. You can't even remember anything, can't even remember *me*, and now... we've been talking about trying these for you for so *long*, and you—it's like you don't trust me!"

"I—I'm sorry, I don't—Dream, I—I just can't remember—I'm having trouble remembering right now, I don't mean to make you feel like I don't trust you," Theseus says, still squinting in the dark to try and see the expression on Dream's face. "I'm sure you're a good brother, I'm just... I don't remember anything."

Dream turns his head. "You don't even care about how hard this is for me," he mutters, and Theseus hurries to correct him, because he *does* care, Dream said he's his brother, of course he cares, but Dream just holds up a hand. "No, go ahead. Read it. It's not like I've spent months and months scrambling to find the money to let you do these, right? Not like I'm just trying to do what's best for you, right?"

"No, no, I'm signing it, I—I'll sign it," Theseus says, squinting down at the thick black line next to the X at the bottom of the page. His hands are shaky. Something at the back of his mind is pounding—probably just a headache. Residual shit. Theseus puts down his signature. The movements of the letters feel foreign, like he's not

used to them. He turns back to Dream, smiling nervously. "See? I signed it! Just like you wanted."

"Just like *you* wanted," Dream corrects. "But you don't remember that."

"I don't," Theseus agrees, and Dream hands the clipboard off to someone, tugging the blindfold back over Theseus's eyes. Damn. "So... where exactly are we? Like, I know you said we're 'here,' but... where *is* that?"

"At a secure care facility," Dream answers. "I told you, we've been making preparations for months. Finally, you're gonna get better. You're gonna improve."

Theseus chuckles a bit, and Ponk goes back to poking at him with various instruments of medical equipment. "Geez, my health's gotta be in shambles for all this to be happening," he muses, and Dream huffs out a half-laugh. A few more minutes go by, and Ponk keeps examining him, likely making certain that he's okay. Theseus's arms are starting to hurt a little; his wrists feel a bit stiff. He clears his throat. "Um, hey, doc, my arms are kinda... like, my wrists, they feel uncomfortable."

"That's part of it," Dream says quickly, and someone hurries over. Something prickles at the back of Theseus's head again, right before a pretty sizable needle pokes into the skin on his wrist. He lets out a quiet gasp, and Dream sucks in a breath through his teeth sympathetically. "Probably should've warned you about that."

"Uh, *yeah*," Theseus says around a bewildered laugh. Another needle pokes into his other wrist, and after a moment of odd pressure, they feel relatively fine again. The needles are promptly removed. "That's, um... that's much better. Thanks."

"Of course," Dream says, and his hand ruffles through Theseus's hair again. "Ponk, does everything look good? Can I take him to his room now?"

Ponk hesitates-Theseus can hear his slight movements stop-and he clears his throat. "Uh, yeah, he should... he's fine to go, just be

careful with him. No strenuous activity,” he says, uneasily, and Theseus nods. “Dream, I mean it. He’s in bad shape.”

“I know that,” Dream says, and Theseus winces as someone removes his IV, “you don’t have to tell me. I won’t let him get himself hurt, Ponk, I’m not an idiot.”

Dream puts an arm around Theseus’s shoulders, and Theseus shifts, carefully feeling along the edge of the bed. He doesn’t want to fall. “The tiles are so cold,” he says, wincing as he stands, and Dream chuckles. “My feet are fuckin’ freezing, man, seriously.”

“Your room isn’t too far, you can deal with it for a little,” Dream tells him, and Theseus groans, but he stumbles his way along, relying on Dream to keep him steady. Dream gently nudges him until he’s leaning against a wall. “Stay put.”

“What? Why? Are you going somewhere?” Theseus asks, but Dream doesn’t answer. There’s some beeping, then retreating footsteps. Theseus, presumably, is alone. He wonders if he should try to follow Dream.

Dream had said to stay put, sure, but Theseus doesn’t want to be alone. He still doesn’t know where he is, not really, and he barely remembers anything. Isn’t he sick? Should he even be out here right now? Where had Dream left him? Theseus shifts, uneasy. Well, it can’t hurt to feel along the walls, can it? Just to try and find Dream?

Theseus carefully outstretches his hand in front of him and trails it along the wall. He takes measured steps; he doesn’t want to trip over anything, and if there are stairs somewhere, he doesn’t want to fall. In the middle of the wall, there’s a warm stretch, a long strip about the width of his hand. It feels like there’s lights under there somewhere, but Theseus isn’t worried about his hands getting burned. It’s not hot enough to warrant concern.

He walks for a while. It could be any amount of time, really. Theseus just traces the walls, and when he finds a corner, he turns and keeps following the walls. There’s no sign of anyone—he figures that the sight of someone stumbling around in a blindfold would catch the attention of whoever’s here, but it never happens. Theseus just

keeps walking.

It feels like ages. Theseus gets tired, eventually. He's sure that he couldn't have been walking for very long, given that he's got some kind of sickness. Then again, does it affect how long he can walk for? His muscles are aching. Theseus figures he can sit down for a bit. There's no harm in it, really. He'd tried to find Dream, but he supposes he'll have to wait until Dream comes to him.

He sits on the ground. It's cold, smooth stone. Theseus isn't sure why, but he doesn't much like the cold. It makes him feel sleepy. Theseus traces his fingertips along the floor, making weird, loopy shapes and writing out his name. Then Dream's name. Then Ponk's. He doesn't know many names. His finger starts to trace the beginning of a W, and he pauses. That's odd.

Then, the hairs on his arms stand up, there's that weird feeling at the back of his head, and Theseus starts to look around, but he can't exactly... look. "Theseus, what the hell are you doing?!" Dream asks, sounding quite panicked. "I've been looking for you for hours!"

Theseus furrows his brows. That can't be right. It's been a while, yeah, but... surely it couldn't have been more than ten minutes. Maybe fifteen. "Sorry," he says anyway, because maybe his perception of time is a little weird after whatever had happened in the accident. "I meant to wait for you, but I-I didn't like being alone, so I wanted to look for you."

"When I tell you to stay put, I *need you to stay put*," Dream grits out, and his hand is on Theseus's arm now, pulling him up. Theseus stumbles to stand, barely able to regain his balance before Dream is tugging him back along. "Come on. You *really* need to be in your room. Can't even trust you to stay in one place, I *swear*..."

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry," Theseus says, laughing a little. Dream's kind of overreacting. It's not like Theseus had tried to run away or some shit, he'd just been looking for Dream. Dream keeps tugging him down the hall. "Calm down! You're hurting me, seriously, your hand's way too tight on my arm-"

"I wouldn't *have* to hold you so tightly if you didn't run off when I

specifically told you to stay where you were,” Dream tells him firmly, leaving no room for argument. Theseus has the good sense to look sheepish. Dream’s clearly stressed out. Hell, Theseus probably would be too if he were in Dream’s position. Maybe there’s something here that could put him in danger. Dream yanks him forward abruptly again. “If you just listened to me, we’d be walking just like we were earlier. I don’t *like* being harsh with you, Theseus, but sometimes you just-! You don’t give me any other choice! You can’t keep putting yourself in danger!”

“Okay! Okay, I’m... I’m sorry, I-I get it, I won’t,” Theseus says, and Dream’s hold on him goes slightly slacker. “I just... wanted to find you, that’s all.”

Dream sighs, and they stop walking for a moment. “Well, it’s good that you know to come find me when you’re scared,” he says, “but I really do need you to be careful. I need you to *listen* to me, Theseus.”

“I will,” Theseus says, “I promise.”

Dream’s hand ruffles through his hair again. “Good,” he says, and Theseus beams up in the direction of his voice. At least he can trust Dream. Dream’s just worried for him, so very worried that Theseus can’t help but be comforted by it. Someone-his big brother-is looking out for him. Dream’s hand leaves his arm, and he wraps an arm around Theseus’s shoulders instead. “C’m on. I wanna show you your room.”

“So... I’m staying in the facility?” Theseus asks, curious, and Dream hums an affirmative. The two of them walk further down what Theseus assumes is a hallway, coming to a stop after a few more moments. “Did I have a room before this one? What was it like?”

“I mean, obviously, you had a room,” Dream snorts. “It was-well, you’re a teenager, so you’re messy as shit.”

“That’s just *me*, that’s not my room,” Theseus huffs, impatient. Dream hesitates, then pulls away from him. Shit, had he made Dream upset again? “I just meant... I wanna know what I was like-and what I liked-before I lost my memory. But if it’s too hard to talk

about that right now, that's all good, big man, no worries."

There's a few beeps-maybe a keypad? It sounds the same as the beeps from earlier-and Dream's hand settles between his shoulders. "Here, come in, let's close the door so I can let you see what it looks like in lighting that's... better suited for you," he says, and Theseus nods, letting Dream guide him into the room. There's the sound of the door closing, a sort of pressurized sound, and the blindfold is carefully taken off of him. Dream steps back, arms wide as his eyes crinkle at the corners. "So? What do you think? D'you like it?"

Theseus looks around. The light is dim-way too dim for him to make out much of anything-but he can still see a few shapes. There's a bed and a nightstand that has a small object on top of it. Almost directly next to the bed is a door. Theseus assumes that's the bathroom. There's a desk in the corner with rounded edges, but there's nothing on it; it's completely bare. The walls look soft. The floor is soft, too.

It's like the room is injury-proof.

It's so...

Bare.

It's bare.

But Dream looks so excited, and Theseus doesn't want to ruin that. "It's... nice," he settles on, smiling gently. Dream's face falls a bit-well, his eyes aren't as squinted in the corners anymore-and Theseus shrugs. "I just, um-I think it's a bit empty, innit?"

Dream looks to the bed, then back to Theseus. "I made it for you. I thought you'd like it," he says, voice carefully measured. Theseus glances down at his arms; the hair there is raised, and that weird feeling at the back of his head is there again. Dream tilts his head. "What's missing? From the room, I mean. Since you hate it."

"I don't *hate* it, Dream," Theseus hurries to correct, laughing a little, but Dream doesn't laugh along with him. Theseus shrugs. "I-I dunno, like... maybe a TV? A phone? Some books? Some shit like that,

man, something to *do*.”

“You really think your eyesight can handle a screen? Theseus, you can’t even be in a room with the lights fully on, I can’t give you a phone or a TV. Besides, if you need to get in contact with anyone, you can just ask me to contact them. Not like you have any friends, though, so it’s kind of pointless of me to even offer,” Dream says. He pokes at Theseus’s shoulder. “You never were much good at making friends. Always too annoying.”

“That’s not a very nice thing to say,” Theseus says, brows furrowed. “You’ve hurt my feelings.”

Since Dream is blunt, that must mean Theseus is too, right? Maybe that’s their dynamic-banter and blunt honesty-but Theseus doesn’t have to sit here while Dream borderline insults him. It might just be Dream trying to get him back into usual habits, but it still hurts to hear, especially when Theseus barely knows anything about himself. He doesn’t want to know about all the negatives just yet.

Dream’s eyes narrow. “Well, I’m just telling you the truth. You’re loud and you’re rude, and you talk too much. Your jokes piss people off and you swear like a sailor. Maybe if you got yourself in check, somebody other than me would’ve stuck around by now,” he says, and Theseus frowns at him. That’s really fucking mean, brother or not. Dream sighs. “Look, I’m just... I’m stressed, and you keep asking me for things, and I have so much on my plate already. I wouldn’t be saying these things if they weren’t true, Theseus. It’s not like I *want* to say them, but you asked, so I figured answering honestly would be the best way to help jog your memory. Sue me for caring, I guess.”

Had Theseus asked about his friends? “I just asked about a phone, didn’t I?” he asks, and Dream crosses his arms, brows furrowed.

“Geez, might be some short-term stuff too. You asked me about talking to friends, don’t you remember?” Dream prods, and Theseus wracks his brain. He can’t remember asking about it. If he hadn’t asked, why would Dream lie and say he had? Theseus probably asked about it. Dream shakes his head. “Whatever, I’ll just have Ponk check in with you while I deal with some other stuff. It’s really

late, so you should try to get some sleep.”

Theseus glances around the room. There’s no windows and no clock. His stomach growls. “Um, Dream, I’m kinda hungry, I don’t know when I ate last,” he says, and Dream raises a brow at him.

“Just eat in the morning. Seriously, Theseus, I’m really busy, I don’t have time to get you a snack,” Dream says, exasperated.

Theseus steps forward. “But I wasn’t asking for a sn-”

“I’ll see you tomorrow morning, Theseus,” Dream cuts in, no room left for argument. He nods towards the bed, heading over to the door. “Go to bed.”

The door closes behind Dream, bathing the room in darkness.

Theseus goes to bed, because what else is there to do?

It begins :)

Ooooo you wanna give these artists attention so bad:

[This](#) super cool design for Spider-Tommy :D

[This](#) incredible sketch of Henry the beloved!!

[This](#) ANIMATIC??? Like an actual animatic. That’s *insane* /pos!! It’s so cool!!!! I love it sm :D

pincushion

Chapter 62: pincushion

The experiments begin.

CW: manipulation, human experimentation, slight (?) body horror

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Hannah sits down behind the console, eyes focused on the tablet in her hands.

This kid is a medical marvel.

When Dream had initially told the small, confidential project team that his little brother had in fact been the one to receive that fateful spider bite, Hannah had been sympathetic. It must have been hard for him to watch his little brother out and about, battling villains and getting hurt. Now, though, Hannah just feels nervous. Itchy, maybe. It's an anxious kind of itch that sits just beneath her skin, the kind that makes her feel as though she'd rather not be present in the lab.

Hannah continues to scan over the various genetic records and medical information regarding this Theseus kid. She still wonders who would name their kid something like that. Scrolling past a short note from Ponk-the kid's metabolism is apparently enhanced, something about needing more food-Hannah reads over the details of Theseus's regenerative abilities.

This is why they're here.

Dream had said that these trials, these experiments, could possibly help them discover a cure for nearly any physical ailment that requires the regeneration of cells. Obviously, there's the genetic restriction to find a workaround for, but the regenerative capabilities of the spiders-there are multiple now, in secure tanks in the most heavily guarded area of the facility-are far and away beyond any kind of regenerative technology currently circulating the market.

She still wonders just how Dream managed to develop something like that. It's a feat of science, truly, and Hannah's honored to be a part of it in any capacity. The science of this-the experiments they're undertaking-is fascinating. Hannah, for one, can't wait to see how this will go, how their experiments could change the course of biotechnology as they know it.

"Have you met the kid?" Ponk asks from beside her, and Hannah hums noncommittally, not looking up from her tablet. There's a ton of information-blood type, allergies, blood cell count, you name it-and she's got to make sure she's not looking for things that have already been tested. Ponk nudges her shoulder. "I've met him."

"Congratulations," Hannah says dryly.

Honestly, Hannah doesn't really have an opinion on the kid one way or the other. She'd heard in passing that he's sick-at least, that's what Dream had been telling one of her co-workers-and that, as a result, Dream's hoping that these experiments will improve his overall health. Hannah isn't all too sure about how true that is, considering the whole Spider-Man ordeal.

"He's a good kid," Ponk says, and Hannah raises a brow at him. Ponk is nice enough; he's the only *medical* doctor on their team, and that makes him indispensable. Hannah enjoys his company most of the time. Mostly. Ponk nudges her again. Hannah scowls. "You know, Hannah, I think there's something more going on."

Hannah huffs out a laugh at that, scrolling further down Theseus's file until she finds what she's looking for. Regeneration. Muscle growth. Bone density. That's what she's meant to be testing today. "I

mean, obviously, but I'm not about to pry. It's Dream's business. We really shouldn't interfere," she warns gently, and Ponk sighs, crossing his arms as he leans back in his seat. She only says it because George is in the room-Dream's right-hand man-but she doesn't tend to pry regardless of whether or not there are eyes on her. She doesn't *need* to pry. It's not her business. Hannah points towards the console. "You're in charge of monitoring and managing his vitals. I'm gonna be the one administering the tests and taking observational notes, so you've got to keep track of the medical side of things, okay?"

"I'll do my best," Ponk says, looking rather uncertain as he navigates the screen. Hannah's aware that he's still relatively new to this. Dream had said that Ponk is one of the best doctors in London, and that it had taken a lot of convincing to bring him onto the project. Hannah hadn't asked what he'd meant by that. Ponk glances up, and sure enough, the doors have opened into the testing chamber. Ponk swears under his breath. "Gotta be kidding me."

The kid-Theseus, Hannah reminds herself-is blindfolded. That's odd. "Say hello to everyone in the observation room, Theseus," Dream instructs, his voice crackling slightly as it comes over the speakers. Theseus's shoulders are by his ears. Dream's hand is on his elbow, his eyes crinkled at the corners. "Go on, don't be shy."

"Hello," Theseus says softly, waving just slightly in the wrong direction. Hannah notes that he's dressed in white, almost pyjama-like clothing. That'll be easy to maneuver around in terms of equipment. Hannah makes a mental note to thank Dream later.

Dream helps Theseus up onto the observation table, adjusting the settings until it's supporting his back. "How's that? Is that okay? Are you comfortable?" he asks, and Hannah smiles a little to herself. Dream's a nice guy, and it really shows in the way he interacts with Theseus. She's pretty lucky to have a boss like him. Theseus nods, and Dream straps his left wrist into the pulse monitor, patting his knee. "I'll just be in the observation room. Hannah's gonna be administering your treatment today, so be nice to her, alright? Be polite."

"I'm not gonna be *rude*," Theseus huffs playfully, but his smile dims

as Dream squeezes his knee maybe more forcefully than necessary. Hannah frowns to herself, but she says nothing. It's not her business. Theseus is quiet for a moment, then he turns his head in the direction of the large window that Hannah, Ponk, and George are sitting comfortably behind. "Good morning."

It's six in the evening.

Hannah's frown deepens.

She still says nothing.

Dream leaves the testing chamber and enters the observation room, clapping George on the shoulder and nodding at Hannah. "You can go ahead in. If he gives you any trouble, let me know," he says, and Hannah makes a mental note to tell him nothing of the sort. Dream steps closer to the console, pressing down on the button near the microphone. "Theseus, keep still."

Theseus had been fidgeting idly with the hem of his shirt. Sure, Hannah might need him to stay still for a couple of tests later, but there's no need for him to be scolded *now*. Hannah just swallows her doubt and heads into the testing chamber, placing her hands delicately in the sterilization device and smiling gently, even though Theseus can't see her.

"Hi, Theseus," she says, and while anyone normally would have been startled, Theseus just turns his head in the direction of her voice and smiles at her. Hannah notes that the hair on his arms is on end. Fascinating. Hannah starts to sort through the array of items on the table next to her, picking up an EKG monitor. "My name is Hannah. I know you already knew that, but I figured it's polite to introduce myself properly anyway. I'm just gonna place these electrodes on your chest, if that's alright with you."

"Yeah, that's fine, go ahead," Theseus says, and Hannah nods, sticking the electrode pads just under the loose collar of Theseus's shirt. It hangs loose on him, loose enough that Hannah doesn't really have to work around it, which is a bit concerning. Malnutrition might be something to look into, but given that his metabolism is incredibly fast, that comes as no surprise to her. Theseus shivers.

“Sorry, I’ll keep still, I’m just... it’s kinda cold in here.”

His temperature regulation is far different than a normal human being’s. Obviously, he still maintains some level of homeostasis in regards to his body temperature, but he’s far more susceptible to cold temperatures. Hannah attributes that almost hibernation-like quality to the arachnid side of things.

Hannah smiles at him and starts to reassure him. “It’s fi-”

She’s cut off by Dream’s voice over the intercom. “Stop shivering. You’re fine,” he says, and there’s a scowl on Theseus’s face for a fraction of a second before he smothers it with a strained smile. Hannah hesitates, the EKG still in her hands. Dream’s voice crackles over the speakers yet again. “Hannah, get on with it.”

“Right,” she mumbles, turning back towards the array of equipment as the EKG machine powers on and begins to keep track of Theseus’s vitals. She picks up a butterfly needle and a couple of evacuated collection tubes and sets them to the side, tying a tourniquet around Theseus’s left bicep. “I’m just gonna grab some blood samples, and then we’ll get to the actual tests, okay?”

Theseus nods, pointedly keeping as still as a statue as Hannah sticks him with the needle, filling the vials. She moves to get a cotton ball and medical tape, but as she turns back, the skin she had pierced has completely healed over. Theseus tilts his head. He looks kind of like a puppy. “Is everything okay?” he asks, like he’d sensed her hesitation somehow, and Hannah shakes her head to clear her thoughts.

“Yeah, it’s fine, sorry about that,” she tells him, and she takes one of the multiple syringes from the side table, wincing preemptively. “I’m going to test the effe-”

Dream’s voice cuts across her own once more. “I already explained what we’re doing, and he agreed. You don’t have to waste your time explaining things to him again, don’t worry,” Dream says, and Hannah blinks.

She’s not wasting her time, it’s just standard procedure.

Hannah had worked in the pharmaceutical department before being transferred to this confidential team, and even though the paperwork that volunteer subjects had signed always contained all the information about the product, Hannah had been instructed very adamantly to make sure she'd explained it all to them again.

Maybe things are different in biogenetic engineering.

Hannah just nods, and she turns back to Theseus, glancing down at the syringe in her hand before glancing up at his blindfolded face. "I'm going to stick you with the needle. Ready?" she asks, and he nods. She figures it's only fair to give him a warning.

The syringe pierces his skin, and Hannah injects the chemical-a carefully crafted concoction, essentially harmless but hard to break down-eyes scanning over Theseus's face to keep track of any potential changes. His skin flushes slightly, then goes pale, and then returns to its normal state, and Hannah blinks, surprised. She jots down some notes, then glances over at the window to the observation room. Ponk shoots her a thumbs-up, looking a little bewildered.

Hannah does the test a few more times with a few more chemicals, each resulting in the same outcome. Theseus's body breaks down every compound with impressive speed. His metabolism is incredible. Hannah tries the last one. It takes a few more moments-it's more of a complex composition, so that's to be expected-but sure enough, Theseus has no problem returning back to his normal state. It's fascinating.

"How are you feeling?" Dream asks, voice crackling over the speakers, tone gentle, and Theseus rolls his shoulders, making a face.

"Uh... fine, I guess? I-I mean, I guess that fine for me isn't really *'fine,'* but..." Theseus trails off, and that's kinda sad, in all honesty. Theseus seems like a good kid, and it really is a shame that he's so sick. Theseus snuffles and looks nowhere in particular. Well, he can't really *look* anywhere, but that's beside the point. "Is... is that it? Is that the treatment? Because I-I don't really feel any different, Dream-"

"There's another option," Dream says, the intercom crackling with his words, and Hannah's stomach drops. "Would you like to try it?"

Theseus brightens up a little, and Hannah tries very hard not to show her hesitancy. "Yeah! If it's gonna help me get better, I don't see why not," he says, so very eager.

"That's great, Theseus!" Dream praises, and Theseus straightens up, grinning. "George, bring it in. Hannah, get him ready."

Hannah looks down at the equipment table again, scowling at the cotton pad and the vial next to it. She grabs it nonetheless-she has orders, and Theseus *has* agreed to it, after all-and she clears her throat. "Right, so I'm just gonna swab this on your neck, just right above your carotid artery, okay?" she says, dousing the cotton pad in the specialized pheromone. "It's gonna be fine, don't worry."

Theseus nods, though if the uneasy flexing of his fingers is anything to go by, he seems a little nervous. Hannah disposes of the cotton ball and the vial in the biohazard waste bin, and she steps back, glancing up at the observation room window again. Dream gestures for her to come back in, and she does, watching with furrowed brows as two attendants enter the testing chamber and start to strap Theseus's ankles and wrists down to the table.

"You're okay, Theseus. This is just a precaution, don't worry. It's nothing bad," Dream says into the mic, eerily soothing. Ponk and Hannah exchange a nervous look. Theseus is strapped into the table-a steel and iron alloy, strong enough to restrain him-and Dream takes his finger off the button, eyes crinkling at the edges as he turns to George. "Tell them to release the spider."

The attendants leave the room, and Hannah closes her eyes.

Theseus is a bit apprehensive.

Of course, he trusts Dream, and he knows that his brother wouldn't do anything that wasn't good for him, so Theseus is trying to keep an open mind. Whatever Hannah had been injecting hadn't really

done anything. Sure, for a moment or two, he'd felt *some* effects-it'd made him feel a bit worse, in fact-but for the most part, nothing had happened.

Theseus feels the hair on his arms stand at end, and there's a familiar pulsing sensation at the back of his mind as he hears the doors close, a pressurized *schwoop*, behind whoever had come in. There's *something* in the room with him. He feels it. Like an instinct, but intensely magnified. It's a strange sensation.

Theseus tries to keep still, even as *something* starts to crawl up his ankle, then his leg, over his trousers and onto his hand. "Hey, uh, Dream...? W-What's going on?" he asks, laughing a little, because he feels like if he doesn't laugh, he's going to panic. Whatever it is that's crawling on him, it is *far* too large and has *far* too many legs for comfort. It scuttles over his hand, scratchy legs darting away from his hand and then back again. "Dream, seriously, what-tell me what it is, I-I don't like this."

"It's your only other option, Theseus," Dream reminds him, and Theseus shudders as the thing's legs scamper over his wrist. The intercom crackles. "It'll be okay. I promise."

That's comforting and all, but the thing-Theseus thinks it might be a spider-scuttles up his forearm and tentatively puts three of its limbs on the sleeve of his shirt. Theseus shakes his head, unintentionally struggling against the restraints. "I-I don't want this, I don't like it, this isn't-something's wrong, I-I don't-!" Theseus cuts himself off, freezing in terror as the hair on the back of his neck stands on end, and the spider-Theseus remembers loving spiders, briefly remembers being somewhere underground-carefully steps over his collarbone. "Please, Dream, take it off, take it off!"

The spider settles into the crook of his neck, and Theseus daren't breathe, chest stuttering as he struggles not to raise his shoulders and potentially crush it. He doesn't want the spider to *die*, doesn't want to harm the poor thing, he just wants it *off of him*. "Hey, hey, it's okay, you're alright, it's just... just a pinch, and then it's over," Dream's voice says over the intercom, and it's somewhat comforting. "Just a pinch, Theseus. Just a pinch."

"Just a pinch," Theseus repeats quietly, stifling a shudder at the way the spider's movements have slowed, the way it feels as though the spider has focused on the still-damp part of his neck that Hannah had swabbed something over. Theseus feels that pulse at the back of his head again, a panicked throbbing in his skull, and he takes a deep breath. "Just a pinch, just a pinch, it's just a-!"

The spider's fangs sink down into his skin.

Theseus screams.

The veins in his neck strain, and Theseus feels nauseous. The spider dashes off, every movement of its legs making Theseus's skin crawl. His entire body feels white hot and freezing cold at the same time. His muscles seize, twitching and pulsating. Theseus feels his organs go into overdrive-really *feels* them and it's a horrible feeling, likely a side effect of whatever his sickness is-and he gags.

Theseus gasps for breath, fingers gripping, *indenting*, into the arms of the chair. The spider's venom-he hopes it's not venom-courses through his veins, and he chokes out another scream as his head pounds. His skull feels like a prison for his aching mind, and he dry-heaves as his stomach turns again. It feels like every hair on his body is standing on end. He feels increasingly paranoid, terrified that he's in danger. But he's not-surely he's not, he's safe here.

He hears the door open again with another *schwoop*, and Theseus screams out again in alarm as the apprehensive sort of feeling in the back of his head escalates to something *pounding* with guttural terror. Theseus thrashes against the restraints, panicked and *terrified*, completely out of his fucking mind for no discernable reason, and someone puts their hands on their shoulders.

It should be a warm gesture, a comforting one, but all it does is make the paranoia worse.

"Calm down, I'm right here, you're okay, you're okay," Dream says, sounding a bit panicked as his hands hover-how does Theseus know they're hovering?-over Theseus's shoulders now, rather than being firmly there.

"It hurts," Theseus croaks, chest seizing with dread as he hears more people enter the room. "It *hurts*, Dream, *help me*, please, I-I can't-! It *hurts!*"

The restraints on his arms are quickly undone, and Theseus sobs, curling into himself as his muscles, his bones, his head-they all start to ache something terrible. He's wrapped his arms around himself, choking on his own pain and bile and tears as he writhes slightly in pain. Dream gently-very gently, but it still makes a pang of fear ring out in Theseus's mind-pulls his arms away from him, bringing Theseus into a gentle hug.

"I've got you, I won't let anything hurt you, you know that, right?" Dream soothes, rubbing small circles in the middle of Theseus's back. Theseus nods, gripping to the back of Dream's shirt like a lifeline as the pain wracks his body. He feels ill-well, more ill than usual, surely-and Theseus hiccups, gagging again as his veins pulse angrily. Dream holds him like he's something to be protected. "You're gonna be okay. I know it hurts, Theseus, it's almost over."

"It hurts so *bad*," Theseus chokes out, and he feels Dream nod against his hair.

"I know."

"I h-hated that, Dream," Theseus stammers, chest stuttering with how much effort it takes to breathe, and Dream smooths down his hair. "I-It hurts."

"It's making you better," Dream reminds him, "and I wouldn't have you do it unless I was sure it was going to work. You trust me, don't you?"

Theseus nods, though his body is suddenly filled with paralyzing fear, and he jumps back almost involuntarily. "I wanna go home," he blurts, like it's vomit, like it's bile, and Theseus doesn't have a clue why he's said that. "S-Sorry, I-I've no idea-"

"You *are* home," Dream says firmly. "You're with me, aren't you? We're brothers. We're each other's homes. We're all we have, Theseus."

Theseus nods, gripping his head in his hands as his mind screams in protest again. "I know that, I-I didn't mean-I don't *know* what I meant, I-!" Theseus cuts himself off, and something ugly-dark and ugly-rears its head in the pit of his chest, and he feels a vitriol unlike anything he's ever felt before fill his body, flood his mind. That odd sense at the back of his head pierces through the pain-fueled fog in his head, and Theseus snaps his head up, shoulders by his ears as his mouth starts to move without his approval. "You're gonna hurt me."

The room goes silent.

Theseus has no idea why he's just said that.

The paranoid feeling at the back of his mind is lulled, almost as if it's satisfied with itself.

After another moment, there are hands over his own, gently coaxing his fingers away from his palms. Theseus hadn't any idea he'd been clenching his fists. "I think you need to lie down," Dream tells him gently. "You're not yourself. You're not making any sense, Theseus. We'll get you some water and get you something to eat, okay? No one's going to hurt you."

"You are," Theseus says involuntarily. He must be in a bad episode. Maybe it's a reaction from the spider bite. "I-I'm sorry, I don't know why I-"

"You're really hurting my feelings, Theseus," Dream says, sounding wounded, and Theseus outstretches a hand in the direction of his voice, relieved when Dream reaches back. "I know it's your sickness talking. You know that too, don't you? You know I'd never hurt you, right?"

"Of course I do," Theseus says quickly, and he hates how it feels like a lie, hates the way the back of his mind continues its paranoid pulsing. The rest of his body continues to ache. "I-I know that, I just-I don't know what's wrong with me, it *hurts*, Dream, e-everything *hurts*."

Dream is careful as he helps Theseus to stand, and Theseus can

barely walk, the muscles in his legs shooting a piercing sort of pain up his muscles as he stumbles along. "We're done for today," Dream tells someone, and there's a familiar beeping-a keypad. Dream leads him down the hall; he's practically carrying Theseus, given the fact that Theseus can barely hold himself up, exhausted and in agony. Dream props him up against a wall, and Theseus sinks to the ground, muscles and bones having expended too much energy to keep holding him up.

There's more beeping-another keypad. Dream wraps an arm around him and helps him up again, leading him into the room-Theseus's room-and guiding him to his bed. "I'm sorry," he mumbles, and Dream stays silent, removing Theseus's blindfold. "Dream, I'm sorry, I-I didn't mean to, I can't-I don't know what's *wrong* with me."

Dream's eyes are focused, hardened. "It's not your fault that you're sick. I just wish you would control yourself better," he sighs, and Theseus's vision is swimming. Everything feels too loud, feels like too much. Dream puts a hand to his forehead, brows furrowed. "You're burning up, you poor kid. Go on, lie down."

Theseus does as Dream says. The door opens, and Theseus squeezes his eyes shut, whimpering as the light makes his head pound. "Shit, sorry," someone says, and the door's pressurized sound rings through the room. Theseus opens his eyes again, feeling exhaustion seep into his very bones alongside the pain. It's Ponk that's come into the room. "I've got that thing you asked Hannah for the other day."

Dream nods, and Ponk starts to fasten something to the side of the bed. Theseus's limbs feel like lead, especially when Dream takes his right wrist and lifts it into a cuff. "It'll keep track of your vitals when you're asleep," he explains, and Ponk looks uneasy as Dream fastens the cuff around Theseus's wrist. "It's for your safety, Theseus. Ponk has other jobs to do, I can't have him babysitting you all the time. This way, we'll know if something's wrong, even if no one else is here."

That makes sense. Theseus coughs, stomach churning. Maybe it's growling. He feels quite famished. "Dream," he croaks, and he barely manages to lift his left arm to loosely grab Dream's wrist, "I-

I'm hungry. Please, I-I need something to eat."

"Do you think you can keep it down? If you can't, I don't want to waste it," Dream says, ever practical, and Theseus nods eagerly. He's so very hungry. Dream nods back, and he jerks his head towards the door. Ponk looks hesitant, but he walks off anyway, and Theseus turns away from the door, eyes squeezed shut until he hears the tell-tale pressurized closing of it.

"It hurts," Theseus croaks again, because his body is starting to jolt as waves of pain pass over him. Theseus sobs. "Dream-Dream, it *hurts*-"

"I know," Dream says, brushing Theseus's hair away from his forehead. It had been stuck there with a cold sweat, and Theseus chokes on another sob as his muscles spasm again, veins pulsing in protest as spider venom courses through his veins. Dream's eyes crinkle at the edges. "You were very brave today, Theseus. Good job."

In between the feeling of his lungs being too big for his ribcage and his chest muscles seizing with jagged aches of pain, Theseus feels a bit of pride. "I was?" he asks, and Dream nods, covering his eyes as the door starts to open again.

Dream's hand lifts, and Ponk has returned, a tray balanced in his hands. Theseus feels as if his head will implode if he sits up, so he just stays down, watching groggily as Dream takes it from Ponk and sends the doctor off again. Theseus has to close his own eyes this time. At the increasingly-familiar *schwoop* sound, he opens them again, slightly surprised to see Dream offering him some water.

"The soup's gonna be a little watered-down, just in case. I don't want you getting even sicker, that would just be bad for everybody," Dream says, and he sets the bottled water down on the nightstand to help Theseus sit up. Theseus leans on him slightly as the steady thrum of pain runs through him. It gets worse. Dream hands him the bottle, and Theseus can barely lift it. His arms are too heavy, his muscles too tense. Dream chuckles a bit, and Theseus scowls at him, only to wince as his brain pounds against his skull again. "I'm not laughing *at* you, I promise, I'm just-I'm happy I'm here to take

care of you.”

“Mhm,” Theseus mumbles. He manages to lift the bottle of water, and he’s thirstier than he’s ever been in his entire life. Probably, anyway. He doesn’t remember much still. He gulps down the water, making a face as it churns in his gut. Maybe he should take his time. He hands the water bottle to Dream and wincing. “It *hurts*.”

“I’m right here,” Dream reassures him, and Theseus nods. Dream hands him the tray, and Theseus picks up the spoon, hands shaky as he slowly sips away at it. His hair keeps getting in his face, which is annoying; he’s only got one free hand, after all. Dream sweeps his hair back and ties it for him. Theseus smiles weakly, trying to ignore the lingering pain as best as he possibly can. Dream’s eyes crinkle at the corners again. “I gotta say, I’m impressed at how well you held it together. I know it must’ve been hard for you, but you pulled through. That’s good.”

Theseus hums. “Thank you,” he murmurs, and he has some more soup. Dream ruffles the front of his hair. The back of his mind feels uneasy. The two of them sit in silence for a bit, Dream watching Theseus struggle to eat the soup, ready to jump in just in case he needs help. There’s something bothering Theseus though, through his foggy, slightly delusional haze. “Dream... can you tell me what our family’s like?”

Dream blinks at him. “What do you mean?” he asks, voice carefully measured. “I already told you, we’re brothers.”

Theseus frowns. “Well, yeah, but... where are our parents? Do we have any other siblings?” he asks, and Dream’s brows furrow. Theseus hurries to correct himself, setting the spoon in the now-empty bowl. “I-I know you said we have each other, I just meant-”

“Do you want me to get in contact with our mom?” Dream asks, his entire demeanor shifting suddenly, and Theseus sputters. Dream puts a hand over his, eyes soft, but there’s still something at the back of Theseus’s head telling him not to answer. “Theseus, if you want her here, you just have to say the word. She might even be able to jog your memory! All you have to do is tell me you want her here, and I’ll bring her here. I’m sure she’ll be very happy to see

you.”

Theseus makes a face. “Won’t she be happy to see you too?” he asks, and Dream looks away.

“We... haven’t really gotten along lately. Just a difference of opinion, y’know? About how best to help you,” he explains, and Theseus ignores the weird feeling that’s very insistent at the back of his head. Dream glances back at him, tilting his head as he takes the tray. “So, what do you think? Do you want her here?”

“I... I think so, yeah. It’ll be good, won’t it?” Theseus says, and Dream’s eyes crinkle up as he heads to the door.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he says. “Goodnight, Theseus.”

Theseus lets the lingering pain lull him away to sleep, the *schwoop* of the door going unheard.

This chapter is a bit intense, but I hope you guys enjoyed it nonetheless! The next chapter is gonna be *way* different (in a good way), so don’t worry, I’m not dumping a truckload of unending angst on y’all, lol.

puzzle pieces

Chapter 63: puzzle pieces

Quackity has a very unusual morning.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Quackity is having a relatively terrible morning.

He's just found out that Dream-the sick bastard-had killed Spider-Man. He's overcome with the urge to summon his gauntlet and smash some shit, just to get his anger out, but he's in his office at the school, which means that's not feasible right now. He grips the phone with his left hand, knuckles white and jaw clenched.

"He *stabbed* the kid?" he asks, deathly quiet and absolutely fucking *furios*, and there's a distressed sort of groan from the other end of the line. "And you're sure the kid's dead? What the fuck happened to wanting him alive?!"

"I don't know, man!" Sapnap says, just as frustrated as Quackity. *"He stabs the kid with a syringe yesterday and tells him he has eight hours to live, I didn't exactly have the time to ask more questions! I was gonna tell you last night, really, I was, but you started talking about taking down Schlatt, and then I told you Dream wanted to have Schlatt start to charge pro-Spider-Man protestors with inciting criminal activity, so we didn't get around to it by the time Karl woke up fucking screaming!"*

Quackity sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose between his fingers. "I know, I don't-I'm not mad at *you*, obviously it's not your fault, I'm sure the kid had you bested," he says, and Sapnap grumbles something under his breath. In spite of all the fear and frustration he

feels, Quackity finds himself smiling softly. Such a prideful bastard. His smile quickly falls. "Look, I... Schlatt's having me fire anyone that's openly supporting Spider-Man-something about trying to regulate vigilante 'propaganda' in schools or some shit like that. Niki and Sam walked out when I announced it to the staff this morning, so I'm already down two teachers."

"Shit, man, that's... you're really getting fucked over," Sapnap says sympathetically, and Quackity hums. *"If it makes you feel any better, things are shit on my end, too. Apparently, Dream brought Spider-Man in-resuscitated him, I think? I don't know jack shit about science, though, so all I know is that he's alive again-and he won't let me see him. But everyone else on the project is allowed in, including George, so... I think he might be onto us."*

"How the fuck would he have found out? Did you say something to him?" Quackity demands, scrolling frantically on his computer to check if he'd let something slip in his messages with anyone. He's careful when he's talking to Sapnap through channels that Dream has access to, they both are, and there'd be no way Dream could know about Sapnap's double-crossing without something having given it away.

Sapnap sighs. *"No, but I, uh... I kinda went ballistic when I found out he injected the kid with poison,"* he says, and Quackity runs a hand through his hair. *"I didn't-I'm not an idiot, I didn't give it away-"*

"I didn't say you were an idiot-"

"I know, I just-you know I wouldn't ruin this for us, you know I wouldn't," Sapnap says, firm and determined, and Quackity closes his eyes in frustration. He's not frustrated at Sapnap, of course, he's just pissed off in general. *"Q, I think... I think I probably know Spider-Man. Like, his civilian identity. 'Cuz I can't think of any other reason he won't let me talk to the guy."*

That's... an interesting theory.

Quackity swears under his breath as there's a knock on the door. "Shit, I have to go, this has to wait 'til later, someone's here to see me. Come in!" he calls, and the door opens, revealing a very

disheveled and numb-looking Wilbur. Sapnap starts to say something else, and Quackity lets out a frustrated huff. "I said *later*."

He hangs up and sets his phone back on the desk, gesturing for Wilbur to take a seat across from him, and Wilbur does. Quackity's brows furrow; Wilbur looks like shit. "I, um... I need to go home," Wilbur says, sounding stunned as his voice wavers a little, and Quackity waits for him to continue. He wonders why Wilbur's eyes are unfocused, why he looks like he's on the verge of tears. "Quackity, I... I need some time off."

While Quackity wants to be sympathetic, wants to agree, he's understaffed-substitute teachers are far and few between at the moment-and Wilbur's already gotten more paid time off than Quackity is technically allowed to give him. "You know I can't do that, Wilbur," he says gently, and Wilbur's eyes snap to him, suddenly sharp. Quackity quite likes Wilbur, in spite of their silly ongoing feud, and he would really rather not fight with him right now. "I know it sucks, but I can't give you any more vacation time-"

"I'm not asking for a fucking *vacation*," Wilbur spits. "Tommy's gone missing."

Quackity feels like he's been dunked in ice water.

"What?" he asks, and he sounds winded, even to himself.

Wilbur nods, anger and confusion and devastation mixing and shifting on his face. "My mum just called me, said she went down to the station with Techno to file the report," he explains, voice resigned and terrified. "She said she didn't want to explain what happened over the phone, said it would be better for me to hear it-hear the details in person."

There's a sort of realization that hits Quackity then, a slow-dawning horror that makes his heart skip a beat. "Tommy's missing?" he asks, quiet and *scared*, more scared than he's heard himself sound in a long time. Because if *Tommy* is suddenly missing, and *Spider-Man*'s just been killed and captured, then-

"She said he left last night and didn't come back this morning,"

Wilbur sobs, unintentionally confirming Quackity's worst fears, and he folds in on himself in the chair. He wipes at his eyes frantically, clearly trying to keep his composure as best as he can. "H-He's not here, either, Quackity, he's-I don't know what happened, I-I have to go home, I can't pretend like everything's fine, I'm sorry but I just can't-!"

"Hey, hey, no need to apologize, man," Quackity says hurriedly, walking around the desk to sit in the chair beside Wilbur, a hand gingerly on his shoulder. Wilbur shakes him off as he wipes away his tears, and Quackity swears he sees a flash of humiliation cross Wilbur's features before it's replaced with barely-stifled sadness. Quackity tries to work through his own shock in order to respond. "I'll figure something out, I'll find someone to cover for you, take as much time as you need. You-"

"I owe you nothing for this," Wilbur grits out. "Don't pull that shit. Not now."

Quackity's brows knit together. "Wilbur, I wasn't gonna-this is *Tommy* we're talking about, I'm not bringing up our petty bullshit," he says, and he reminds himself that the last thing anyone needs right now is for him and Wilbur to spit vitriol at each other. Quackity takes a deep breath and tries his hardest to make his expression reflect his sincerity. "I mean it when I say you don't need to worry about it. You don't owe me anything for helping, not when this is the kind of shit that's happening. Anything you need-bills, groceries, manpower for search teams, whatever else-I want to help as much as I can."

For a moment, Wilbur looks furious-looks like Tommy, just a little-his eyes full of prideful indignation, full of the fear of being pitied. Then, the anger fades, and it's promptly replaced with resigned gratitude. "Thank you," Wilbur says softly, putting his hand atop the one Quackity has on his shoulder, and Quackity nods, "that... it means a lot. Coming from you."

Quackity gives him a determined look, somber but persistent. "You know I always keep my word, Wilbur. And I don't fuck around. Not when it comes to the people I care about," he says, and Wilbur smiles weakly. Idly, Quackity thinks it doesn't fit his face right; it's not smug or soft, it's tired and worn out. Quackity gives Wilbur's

shoulder a squeeze. "I'll do everything I can. I've got connections, y'know."

Wilbur laughs quietly, tearfully. "Yeah, sure. Is it... is it fine if I head home?" he asks, pulling away to wrap his arms around himself, and Quackity lets his hand fall back to his side. Wilbur closes his eyes, brows furrowed. "I know I've still got classes to teach for the rest of today, I just--"

"Go home," Quackity tells him. "Like I said, don't worry about it. I'll figure something out."

Wilbur smiles. "Thank you," he says again. "I think I might've had an actual breakdown right here and now if you'd been any less good about this, so... I appreciate it."

"Yeah, man, no problem," he says, and Wilbur stands, heading over to the door. Quackity clears his throat. "Uh, would you mind telling Karl to come in on your way out? I just-I remembered I need to talk to him about something."

Wilbur nods again, and Quackity wonders if he knows. If he doesn't know, whoever does know will probably tell him. Quackity knows that someone's been helping Spider-Man-helping *Tommy*, he corrects himself-and he has no doubt that it's gotta be one of Tommy's friends. It's more likely to be Tubbo than it is to be Ranboo, but Quackity thinks that both of them could potentially be good allies, considering that Tubbo's incredibly good with tech and Ranboo has led multiple protests already. Obviously, Quackity's not going to scold Ranboo for protesting. He's only required to do it for the teachers; Schlatt's new policies say nothing about students.

Regardless, at least one of them knows, which means that Tommy's family has likely found out his identity by now if they haven't already.

It's easy for Quackity to connect the dots-eight hours after the fight between Dream and Spider-Man, Tommy mysteriously goes missing? It's more than a coincidence. Not to mention, Tommy's grades having dropped momentarily right as Spider-Man had first been appearing makes much more sense now. The way he'd been so stressed to the point where *Karl* of all people had noticed enough

to suggest mandatory counseling...

Well, suffice to say, Quackity is horrified with himself.

All those fights, all that damage, all the wall-smashing and goblet-blasting, it had all been directed at Tommy. Quackity buries his head in his hands and hisses out a *fuck* under his breath, proceeding to slam an open palm on his desk. "Well, you certainly seem upset," Karl says from over by the door, and Quackity looks up. He blinks rapidly and lets out a weary sort of laugh. Karl drags one of the chairs over to Quackity's side of the desk and sits beside him. "What is it, what's wrong?"

Quackity hesitates. "Karl, if... if I tell you this, it doesn't leave this room, got it?" he says, and Karl nods, brows furrowed a little in confusion. Quackity reaches up and smooths the crease between them out, a shaky, small smile on his face. "Nah, don't frown like that, it's not about... that part of my life-well, maybe a little, but-I know you don't like thinking about it. It's... it's somethin' different."

"Okay," Karl says, and Quackity can see the way he steels himself, ready for anything Quackity has to throw at him. It's one of the things he likes best about Karl-his openness. He's spontaneous and flexible, which is a good thing, considering that Quackity and Sapnap don't exactly run on conventional schedules. Karl takes his hand and gives him a reassuring sort of look. "Whatever it is, man. I've got you."

"You always got me," Quackity says, quiet. He looks down at their intertwined hands, chewing on the inside of his cheek nervously. God, the guilt is churning in his lungs, and it feels so fucking suffocating. Quackity doesn't know how to say this, doesn't know how to confess to *himself* that he's done the unforgivable, let alone tell it to Karl. He swears under his breath again as the corners of his eyes grow hot with tears. "Fuck, man, I-shit. Karl, I think... no, I *know*. Tommy is Spider-Man."

He looks up at Karl then, surprised to see Karl's face hasn't changed at all. As if his mind is catching up with the conversation, Karl's eyes go wide, and he puts his free hand over his mouth in shock. "What?" he asks, sounding kind of winded. "Are you-you're serious? You-

how did you... find out?"

"Wilbur came in, he said-he told me Tommy's missing," Quackity says, voice breaking on Tommy's name. Karl says nothing, only squeezes Quackity's hand and sits closer to the edge of the seat so that their knees knock together. It's comforting. Grounding, almost. "I started... Karl, it was like-like a fucking *puzzle*, everything just-and when *Sapnap* told me what happened with the fight yesterday, I-I Fuck!"

"Hey, hey, take a deep breath... what happened?" Karl asks, and Quackity wants to tell him the truth, wants to confess everything, but he doesn't want Karl to look at him like he's some kind of monster. Quackity already feels enough like a monster as it is. As if he can tell exactly where Quackity's train of thought has gone, Karl smiles softly at him. "I'm not going anywhere. You can tell me, man, I promise."

"I'm sorry," Quackity says, "I'm so sorry. I-I can't-fuck, Karl, I'm-this is so *fucked*."

"I know," Karl murmurs, and Quackity leans forward, pressing their foreheads together. Karl sighs softly. "What happened to Tommy, Quackity?"

Quackity winces. "You're not gonna like this," he warns, and Karl just hums for him to go ahead, eyes closed in either resignation or apprehension-Quackity can't tell. "Sapnap told me that... that Automata injected Spider-Man with... poison. He fucking *poisoned* the kid. So when Wilbur told me Tommy went missing, I mean-it *can't* be a fuckin' coincidence, Karl, there's just no goddamn way."

Nodding, Karl sits back. "That makes sense," he says slowly. "So... how are you feeling? Knowing that it's Tommy?"

"Like a horrible fucking person," Quackity says, completely honestly, and Karl's brows furrow. If Karl were mad at him, Quackity would know why. If Karl were *scared* of him, Quackity would know why. But Karl is *worried* about him, even knowing what he knows, knowing that Quackity's been beating the shit out of Tommy-albeit unknowingly-and Quackity doesn't know what the fuck to do with

that. Quackity looks down at his hands, pulling away from Karl to pick at the skin around his cuticles. "I'm fuckin' *angry*, Karl. Mostly at Dream, the fucking bastard, but... but I'm mad at *myself*, I'm *horrified*, I-! *Fuck*."

Everything about this is fucked. Quackity doesn't know how the fuck to deal with this. He solves most of his problems with money or violence, mostly because they're the easiest options, the options that give him the time to do what he wants. The only times he solves problems with words is when he's with Karl and Sapnap, when he's with Charlie and Slime. But there's no easy out this time. No quick cash that makes the problem disappear as soon as it changes hands. His gauntlet can't solve this, can't intimidate the problem into submission.

Quackity is at a loss.

Tommy's a good fucking kid. He's the best kid Quackity's ever met, and Quackity's met a lot of them, considering he works at a school. It's a cover, sure, but Quackity *cares*. He cares about every damn kid he meets, wants to give them all good futures, wants to make sure they're being taken care of. He's made lunches free, forced Schlatt to funnel additional funds their way, poured his own savings into trying to make this school as great as it possibly can be.

And Tommy had helped him.

He'd honestly expected Tommy to turn him down when he'd asked him to be head boy-and he had, at first, but not for the reasons Quackity had been expecting. Tommy put *himself* down, as if he's not the most tenacious, ferociously good person that Quackity's ever met. Quackity had been expecting a typical teenage answer-it would kill his social life, he just hadn't had the time, being head boy would be boring, *something* like that-but Tommy had just been doubting whether or not he'd been *worthy*.

Obviously, Quackity understands his hesitance at a deeper level now. He knows that in spite of everything on Tommy's plate-his normal school bullshit, his friends, his incredible work as Spider-Man-he'd still done everything he could whenever he could to help the school. To help *Quackity*. And Quackity doesn't know what to do

with that.

He has no fucking clue how to deal with the fact that it's *Tommy* he'd been throwing through buildings. No idea what to do with the knowledge that he'd actively hurt Tommy, willingly caused him harm. On some level, Quackity definitely holds a shitload of respect for Tommy's alter ego. He'd been using the *incredible* power bestowed upon him to help people, to help out as much as he could, and if that's not the most Tommy thing of him to do, Quackity doesn't know what is.

"Q, are you okay?" Karl asks, and Quackity nods, looking away. He stares down at his phone, wondering if he should call Sapnap. Maybe he should do it while Karl's still here. Karl follows his line of sight and laughs, a little sadly. "We should tell him. The more people that want to help Tommy, the better."

"You're right, I just... Karl, what if he changes his mind? What if he doesn't want to double-cross Dream after all?" Quackity whispers, terrified, because he doesn't know what he'll do if Sapnap is anything but all-in. If Sapnap ends up siding with Dream, that could put everything he's been working towards in jeopardy. Not that Quackity *wants* to doubt Sapnap, but he can't take any risks. He's already risked enough.

Karl closes his eyes, brows furrowed. "He won't change his mind," he says, eyelids fluttering open again. Karl looks towards Quackity's phone. "We should tell him."

"Shouldn't... we'll, we should tell the Watsons, though, shouldn't we?" Quackity asks, still uneasy, and Karl blinks, like he hadn't even thought of that. "We have to call them, we have to-shouldn't they *know*? What-Karl, what if they don't know?"

"I'm sure they know," Karl says, though he sounds nervous. "There's no way they *don't* know."

Quackity nods, turning his phone over in his hands. "Right, you're right, I'm sure-they definitely know, there's no way that kid could've hidden it from all of them," he mutters. "Let me call Manifold, I-we can figure this out, we can make a plan, we can-it'll be fine."

"It's gonna be okay, we'll call Sap, we'll tell him, and then we'll call Jack," Karl says, and God, Quackity is so grateful he's here. Karl is surprisingly calm and collected; Quackity supposes that one of them has to be, but he's really fucking glad it doesn't have to be him. Karl puts a hand on his shoulder. "Deep breaths, man, we'll get through it."

"I'm gonna call him," Quackity says, finger hovering over Sarnap's number.

Karl nods. "Call him."

Quackity taps the screen.

"Don't fucking move," Quackity growls, the barrel of his pistol pressed to the back of Jack Manifold's head, and Jack puts his hands up slowly.

They're meeting in the abandoned quarter. Quackity figured it'd be the best place to discreetly exchange information. Sarnap's got his own pistol pressed against Sneeg's temple, and Karl lingers towards the entrance of the building, looking a little uncomfortable. Quackity hates it when he has to handle business like this in front of him, but these circumstances are... extenuating.

Sneeg shifts a bit, and Quackity winces sympathetically as he sees Sarnap dig the gun in a little harder. "He *said*, don't fucking move," Sarnap says, low and dangerous.

"Are you... our anonymous client?" Jack asks, and Quackity hums. Jack slowly brings his hand down towards his bag, and Quackity watches him like a fucking hawk as he pulls out a thick manila envelope. "We brought what you asked us for, man."

"Hand it to-ah, fuck, we've both got our hands full," Quackity mutters, glancing over at Sarnap, then over at Karl. Karl hurries forward, eyes wide. "Grab the envelope, yeah?"

"Right, yeah, I'm on it," Karl says, slightly muffled by the makeshift mask they'd given him to wear. The three of them are masked up

right now-Quackity and Sapnap are both pretty recognizable villains, which guarantees that these two will take them seriously, but Karl doesn't really have that privilege.

Karl takes the file from Jack, who huffs out a nervous laugh. "Who's this amateur?" he asks, and Quackity scowls.

"It's none of your business," Sapnap cuts in. He looks over at Quackity. "What did you ask them to find out?"

"You guys didn't... discuss it?" Sneeg asks, sounding like he's trying not to laugh, and Quackity kind of wants to die.

This is embarrassing.

Quackity pokes Jack with the gun. "Did you figure out all three?" he asks, and Jack rolls his shoulders. He's very obviously uncomfortable. Quackity can't really blame him. He's had a gun to his own head before, and it's never pleasant.

"We don't know who Spider-Man is," Jack confesses, and honestly, that brings Quackity more relief than frustration at the moment, "but we *did* compile comprehensive evidence detailing Schlatt's forged citizenship. It's enough to put his ass in prison for good."

"And what about Guided Evolution?" Quackity asks, not missing the alarmed look that Sapnap sends his way. Jack sighs, and Quackity swears under his breath. "You didn't find *anything*? Are you fucking kidding me?!"

"Why the fuck are you poking around in that?" Sapnap hisses, sounding panicked, and Sneeg turns his head to look over at Quackity. Sapnap smacks him upside the head. "Eyes forward, fuckface."

"Sorry, sorry," Sneeg mutters. Quackity glances over to Karl, who's shuffling through the manila envelope, brows furrowed in concentration. He looks up and gives Quackity a thumbs-up, and Sneeg huffs. "See? It's all there. Put the guns down, guys, seriously-"

"Shut the fuck up," Sapnap tells him, and Quackity steps away from

Jack, gesturing for Sapnap to do the same. He does-albeit a little reluctantly-and Jack and Sneeg turn around as they exchange a look. Sapnap gives Quackity a nod. "You don't need 'em for that Guided Evolution shit, man, I got you covered."

Quackity crosses his arms, narrowing his eyes at Jack. "This is everything? All the shit you managed to find, it's in there?" he asks, jerking the gun in Karl's direction and training it immediately back on Jack. He's got his gauntlet equipped, sure, but if he needs to kill these fuckers for whatever reason, a single-shot pistol is gonna do the job much faster.

"That's everything," Jack says, and Quackity nods. "We dug around as much as we could, hired hackers and all that, but... a lot of it just isn't there. The shit that we *did* find is in the envelope. It's not a lot, but-"

"Fine. Hey, give them what they're due," Quackity says, and Karl hurries forward, handing Jack the small duffel of cash that they'd prepared. Quackity tucks his pistol back into its holster after clicking the safety back on, and Sapnap does the same. "You did better than I thought you would. Don't poke around in my shit anymore. Our contract's over."

Jack's brows furrow. "What, that's just it? We didn't even give you all the information you hired us to give you," he scoffs.

Sneeg elbows him. "Are you fucking stupid? They're supervillains, man, let it go," he hisses. "We should just go home."

"Oughta listen to your friend," Sapnap tells him.

"Get the fuck out of here," Quackity says. Jack and Sneeg look towards the door, and they back up, still keeping their eyes warily on his and Sapnap's holsters. Quackity clicks his tongue. "Man, leave my sight before I change my mind."

Jack and Sneeg scramble to leave.

As soon as they're out of earshot, Karl hands Quackity the manila envelope. "What do we do now?" he asks, arms crossed. "What's

the plan?"

Quackity frowns thoughtfully, thumbing through the papers in the envelope. "Karl, you keep this information under wraps. I'll let you know when to release the proof to both the government and the press. We need to wait until we're sure that Schlatt's vulnerable. And Sapnap, keep an eye on Dream. I want to know what he's doing to Tommy," he says, eyes dark as he looks up at Sapnap, who nods firmly. Quackity flexes the fingers of his gauntlet, delicate shocks of indigo dancing across the metal.

"Are you sure you wanna know?" Sapnap asks, hesitant but intrigued. "Wouldn't it be better to... I dunno, not have to hear about it?"

"Oh, it'll make me feel guilty, don't get me wrong," Quackity says, a calm kind of fury settling over him. "But I want to know anyway."

"Why?" Karl whispers, exchanging a look with Sapnap.

Quackity wonders whether or not he should answer truthfully.

Honestly, he's not a very violent person. At least, he doesn't consider himself to be one. He likes the thrill of the fight, sure, and it's much easier to intimidate his way to victory. He likes the swift resolution that comes with violence, not the act itself; he likes not having to worry about how he's going to get something done. But Quackity much prefers the domesticity he gets to enjoy with Sapnap and Karl, the quiet halls of the school he's worked so carefully to improve, the warm satisfaction in his chest when he's created something rather than destroyed it.

But with Dream?

Knowing what he knows?

Fuck it.

"I wanna know every fucking detail of what he does to Tommy, so that when I get my hands on that green piece of *shit*," he spits, clenching his fist and feeling his entire body buzz with the electricity, "I can do *worse*."

Karl doesn't look hesitant, as Quackity's come to expect in conversations like these.

He looks determined.

Sapnap doesn't seem that upset at the prospect of Quackity potentially torturing his best friend.

He's grinning wolfishly.

"So let's plan this shit out," Sapnap says, "and let's kick Dream's ass."

Quackity grins back at him. "Fuck yeah."

Tntduo *and* fiancés on Valentine's Day? We love to see it. Also holy shit?? Thank you for 3500 kudos!!! That's fucking bananas /pos

Go check out this absolutely amazing art:

[This](#) absolutely phenomenal art of some events from the most recent chapters :D

[This](#) heartwrenching art of the allium duo scene in chapter 46!!

legacy

Chapter 64: legacy

Tubbo wonders how to keep Tommy's legacy alive until they get him home.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Tubbo is sitting in the Watsons' living room when Techno and Phil break the news to Wilbur.

He has to cover his ears again.

This is the fucking worst.

Kristin comes to sit with him, her arm wrapped around his shoulders as she closes her eyes, presumably shutting out the noise in her own way. Tubbo stares at the carpet, Wilbur's muffled anguish from the kitchen cutting through the somewhat peaceful silence. It's only ten in the goddamn morning, and Tubbo's gone through enough shit for a lifetime.

Tubbo looks for shapes in the threads, trying to distract himself. He hates this. He doesn't want to keep hearing people mourn. He's not unempathetic-if anything, he understands exactly how Wilbur's feeling-but he's just exhausted. There's a quiet lull for a moment, permeated occasionally by Wilbur's choked sobs, and Tubbo looks to Kristin tiredly.

"Is it over?" he asks, quiet, and she glances over at the kitchen before nodding. Tubbo sighs, guilt lacing the relief, and he lets Kristin lead him back into the kitchen. There are a lot of discarded tissues on the table. Wilbur looks like a complete mess, not that

Tubbo can blame him, of course. Tubbo nods at him in greeting. "Hey, Wil."

"Hi, Tubbo," Wilbur croaks, and Phil hands Tubbo a cup of tea, sliding one down the table for Wilbur, too. Tubbo would've laughed at that on any other day; Phil's nervous habit of making tea in stressful situations is normally a little funny, but it just feels hollow right now. *Tubbo* feels hollow right now. Wilbur nurses at the mug of tea, eyes red and puffy. "Fuck."

That's accurate.

"Yeah," Techno says, sounding a bit strained, "that's fair."

"You knew," Wilbur says, not accusatory but resigned, and Techno looks away. Tubbo doesn't blame him. Honestly, he still thinks that the two of them-three if he counts Phil-had done the right thing in keeping the secret. Tommy's identity had been important to him, still *is* important, and Tubbo's glad that he'd helped to keep it under wraps. Wilbur takes a shuddering breath. "You knew and you didn't *tell me*, Techno-"

"You don't think I wanted to? You think that every time that kid came in with a bullet lodged under his skin, my first thought wasn't 'Wilbur would be better at this, Wilbur would know what to say?' I didn't keep it from you *willingly*, Wilbur, I didn't even tell *Phil*." he says, and Tubbo sips on his own tea. He doesn't want to be dragged into this. Techno sighs. "Wil, there's nothin' we can change about it now. We gotta-"

"Give me a fucking minute to process," Wilbur snaps, and Tubbo winces. "You've just told me that Tommy is Spider-Man, that he *died*, and for some reason, you think that sick fucker brought him back to life! He's not missing, Techno, because as far as we know, he's-"

"Don't," Kristin says, and Tubbo jumps a little in surprise. Wilbur's mouth snaps shut. Kristin is clearly on the verge of tears. "Don't do that. Don't get angry at us and lash out like that, Wil. He's just missing. He's alive. He has to be."

Wilbur's brows furrow, but he nods slowly. "You're right, he's... he's just missing," he says. "I just-what the fuck can we even do about it? This isn't *normal*. We don't even get the grace of a normal fucking *kidnapping*. It's Automata we're talking about, that son of a bitch, that absolute fucking *cretin*."

"Which is why we know we *can* rescue Tommy," Tubbo says. Wilbur's gaze snaps up at him, and Tubbo sets his cup of tea down on the table. "Automata's a creepy fucker-no one's arguing otherwise, trust me-which is why we can rely on the fact that he needs Tommy alive. I've got access to the project he's working on, even if it's not the most recent version, and I know for a fact he's been working exclusively with living subjects."

"Not to mention, the sick bastard probably wants to put Tommy through whatever bullshit he's doing when he's conscious. When he can feel it," Phil says darkly, and Tubbo's never been intimidated by Phil before. Phil's an ex-navy guy, sure, but Tubbo's always known him to be kind, if not a bit exasperated by everyone's antics. But the expression on his face right now is *scary*. It's angry, a cold kind of fury that sends shivers down Tubbo's spine. Phil crosses his arms. "If I ever get my hands on that prick, you lot are gonna have to visit me in prison."

"We need to figure out who he is," Kristin cuts in. Tubbo shifts uncomfortably. If Automata is actually someone at Kristin's company, it's likely that she knows him, but she just doesn't know *exactly* who. Kristin sits at the table and gestures for Tubbo to do the same. When he does, she looks at him, an unreadable sort of expression on her face. "You said Automata's working on a project. Is it...? It's Guided Evolution, isn't it?"

Tubbo blinks in surprise. "Oh, um. I mean-it's obviously not-you clearly didn't know about it," he says, trying to get out ahead of any potential self-blaming on Kristin's end.

Her brows furrow. "Well, yeah, I didn't, I had no idea when Tommy asked me about it, and I had no idea when those investigators came asking around," she says, and Tubbo feels a little sheepish about making assumptions now. "They said the name of the project-you said it earlier, it's the only reason I remembered, I just-there was a

lot going on, so I didn't say anything. It's Guided Evolution, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is," Tubbo says, and Techno shifts uncomfortably. "I still have no idea who's actually *on* the project, just... what it's about. It's-well, the spider that bit Tommy, that gave him his powers, it's part of it. Automata-at least, we *thought* it was him-gave himself the bite first, but it wasn't compatible. There's this gene that Tommy has... it's rare, only seven thousand people worldwide have it. That's the only difference between him and the other two subjects."

"Kid's saddled with a hero complex *and* a chosen one complex," Techno mutters, and Wilbur laughs tearfully, "that's just great."

Kristin's focus hasn't shifted. "Automata's working at my company, then," she says, matter-of-fact, and Tubbo nods hesitantly. Kristin eyes the block of kitchen knives, and Tubbo almost feels bad for what Automata's got coming. "I'm gonna fucking kill him."

"We have to find him first, love," Phil reminds her. "Anybody got theories?"

"You're all fucking deranged," Wilbur says, slightly stunned. "Why the fuck are we pretending like we can do anything about this?! As if we can just go storming into Kristin's building and demand Tommy back! We have to be *careful*! I want the guy in prison just as much as any of you-"

"Oh, shut up, Wil, you don't know the half of it," Techno snaps.

Tubbo claps a hand over his mouth, and Phil turns to Techno, aghast. "Techno-"

"No!" Techno says. "We debated on whether or not he should even know, and now he's trying to tell us how we should be handling this?! Screw that!"

Kristin crosses her arms. "Techno, please, we're all stressed, but don't take it out on Wilbur," she says, and Tubbo shifts uneasily in his seat.

Wilbur scoffs in disbelief and jabs his finger in Phil's direction. "Uh, excuse me, what exactly the *fuck* does he mean you all debated on

whether or not I got to know that Tommy is Spider-Man?!” he demands, and Tubbo would very much also like to know.

He'd had to excuse himself from the room pretty quickly after Techno, Phil, and Kristin had started discussing what they'd be telling the cops for the missing person's report. They must've talked about it then, before Kristin and Techno had gone down to the station.

But Tubbo genuinely doesn't understand why they'd even considered not telling Wilbur, and he's just as taken aback as Wilbur is. “Uh, yeah, what's... what's the deal with that?” Tubbo asks, voice carefully measured, because he doesn't want to stoke the flames, but he also doesn't want to put them out.

“We just weren't sure how bad the fallout would be,” Phil says quietly. “Wil, I know better than anyone how it feels to find out so late in the game, I-I... I just wasn't sure if I could knowingly do that to you. The guilt fucks you up, mate.”

Wilbur is quiet for a moment. He stands from the table slowly, a scowl on his face. “Fuck this, I need a cigarette,” he mutters, and he walks out of the kitchen. Kristin follows him.

Tubbo glares at Techno. “Are you kidding me?” he asks, deathly quiet, and Techno just groans, scrubbing his hands over his face. “No, Techno, fuck you, seriously! We don't have time to fuck around here! Either get it together or shut the fuck up and stop lashing out!”

“I'm *scared*, man, give me a break!” Techno shoots back, voice breaking, and Tubbo just shakes his head. They can't afford to waste their energy on in-fighting.

“I'm going back to Tommy's room,” he says quietly. “Come get me when you've all calmed down enough to *actually* plan shit.”

He ignores Techno's tired attempts at asking him to stay, ignores Phil's quiet sniffing, ignores Wilbur's silhouette in the front window, smoke smogging up against the glass. Tubbo goes up the stairs, shutting the door to Tommy's room behind him. It's still an utter mess. Tubbo hasn't bothered to tidy it up much. It feels wrong to do

that, feels like he'd be ripping away the last remnants of active life in the room.

If it's tidied, it'll go untouched until they get Tommy back. It'll look as if no one lives here if it's clean and pristine. Tubbo doesn't want that. He'll make sure it's clean right before they bring Tommy home. He'll make sure the bed's made, make sure that all of Tommy's clothes are clean, and he'll get rid of all the remnants of last night, all the reminders of what had happened. He'll make sure Tommy comes home to a nice room.

But for now, Tubbo wants to keep the feeling of his best friend's presence, even if it's not really the same.

He sits down in the middle of the floor again and takes hold of that stupid fucking mask for the second time this morning. Techno had told him not to. Tubbo knows that it's probably not worth it. He doesn't have superpowers, after all, so it would be incredibly dangerous. On the other hand, he's already come up with the formula for synthetic webbing, given Shroud's weapon capabilities, and he's still got Tommy's multi-mode web shooters. He could load them up with synthetic webbing, could activate the voice changer in the mask, could make sure he's only ever seen from further away to ensure that no one could tell he's much shorter than Tommy.

Tubbo might not have superpowers, but he *does* have technology.

He'd get his ass kicked so fast, though.

Shit.

Tubbo knows it's probably a really fucking bad idea, but he wants to keep Tommy's legacy alive, at least until they can bring Tommy home.

His phone buzzes suddenly, and Tubbo jumps, scrambling to answer it. "Hello?" he asks, clearing his throat when he realizes that he sounds like he's been dragged through hell.

"*Tubbo?*" Quackity's voice asks from the other end of the line, and Tubbo feels a steady wave of fury start to wash over him. What the

fuck could Quackity possibly want from him? Is he really calling because Tubbo hasn't shown up to school today? *"Kid, we gotta talk. It's about Tommy."*

Tubbo stops breathing for a second.

"What about him?" he asks, after much too long a pause, and Quackity makes an uneasy kind of noise.

"Tubbo, I know he's Spider-Man," Quackity says, and Tubbo is half-tempted to hang up and run back downstairs to warn the others. But before he can seriously consider it, Quackity keeps talking. *"And I know you've probably been working with him, yeah?"*

Tubbo nearly drops the fucking phone.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Tubbo asks, voice shaking as he tries his hardest to feign ignorance. "You've lost the plot, Big Q, I-"

"Cut the shit, please, I just-sorry, I shouldn't-Tubbo, I want to help," Quackity says, and Tubbo feels an ice-cold fury flood his veins. *"Have you told his family yet? Do they know?"*

Tubbo grips the knee of his jeans tightly. "If you're asking whether they know Tommy is Spider-Man, the answer is yes, they do. If you're asking about whether they know you've been beating the shit out of him on a semi-regular basis," he says, feeling a nauseating sense of vindication as he hears Quackity inhale sharply, "the answer to *that* would be no. So let me ask, Big Q, how exactly the *fuck* do you think this conversation's gonna go?"

Quackity is quiet for a moment. *"Let me explain-"*

"Oh, you can do all the explaining you'd like to. Just as soon as I tell you what you're gonna do for *me*," Tubbo says, an idea already forming in his mind. Quackity swears under his breath, and Tubbo smiles grimly. "If you don't want your little 'side business' aired out to the public, you're gonna do what I tell you to do, and you're not gonna complain about it, got it?"

"Tubbo, I was going to tell you, I want to help with whatever you

need me to. No blackmail needed, man. My... side business has nothing to do with-well, admittedly, it does have to do with this, but my point still stands. I went into it with the intention of doing what I do for the greater good, but... hurting Tommy... that's just plain evil," Quackity sighs. *"There's no justification for it, I know that. I'm not trying to defend myself, I'm trying-I'm offering everything I've got. I'll do whatever it is you want me to do, so long as it helps Tommy."*

Tubbo ponders this for a moment. On one hand, Quackity is a supervillain. On the other, Tubbo knows that he does care for Tommy. Digging into Quackity's financial records had been confusing for him. It's something he'd never shared with Tommy- he'd been going through enough, there'd been no justification for giving him more shit to wade through-but he's never really understood it until now.

The profits from the arms dealing ring almost exclusively go to underfunded public schools, soup kitchens, homeless shelters- things of that nature. The funds that don't go there are, presumably, for paying Quackity's lackeys. There *is* a hundred thousand pound sum that seems to be unaccounted for, but Tubbo hadn't dug too far into that.

Hell, even some of the money Quackity makes from Las Nevadas gets funneled back into community places that are in need of funding.

Tubbo takes a deep breath.

"Quackity, how do you feel about helping me preserve Tommy's legacy?"

It takes four days for Tubbo to gather himself enough to put the mask on.

It takes three more for him to stop crying when he tries to use the voice changer.

It's been a week, and Tubbo's standing atop a roof, waiting for

Quackity's signal.

"You ready?" Tubbo asks, impatient, and he winces at the sound of his own voice. Well, in all fairness, it's not *his* voice that comes out. It's Tommy's. Far softer than it should be, far more grief-stricken, and a little bit artificial-sounding, but Tommy's nonetheless. There's a shaky breath from the other end of the line, and Tubbo frowns. "Big Q? Are you ready?"

"Shit. Yeah, sorry, man, I just-you sound like..." Quackity trails off, and Tubbo winces. So it's weird for everyone, then. *"I'm-I remember the plan, don't worry. Are you sure you want the wattage that high, though? I could set it lower-"*

"It wouldn't be believable that way," Tubbo cuts in. God, he hates talking right now, but that's sort of Tommy's schtick, so he's gonna have to do it a fair amount during the fight. Might as well get used to it. "I did my research, man. You're not gonna hurt me any more than, like, a really bad static shock."

Quackity hums uncertainly. *"Alright, well, if you're sure,"* he says, and Tubbo rolls his shoulders. He'd tested out the synthetic web shooters yesterday, made sure that they could hold his weight and momentum. He's still getting the hang of it, but it's honestly kind of fun, horrible circumstances notwithstanding. Quackity's deep breath crackles over the comms. *"Comin' in on your right, Tubbo."*

"Perfect," Tubbo mumbles, taking a running start off the edge of the building and firing off a web towards an adjacent one. He prays silently that the web will connect and it does, and Tubbo whoops as he swings up over the skyline. "On my way!"

He swings through the city, heading towards their agreed-upon location. It's nerve-wracking to be so high off the ground, but Tubbo's got to do this. There's no *real* danger. It's practically just stage fighting; Quackity will throw a few punches, Tubbo will throw a few of his own, they'll act just like it's a real fight. Spider-Man will get a victory, and the rumors about his absence across the media will quiet down.

Tommy's reputation will be preserved.

That's what matters.

Tubbo swings low to the ground as he gets closer to the spot, flashing a peace sign to a couple of pedestrians with their phones out before turning his attention back to his web-slinging. He doesn't know how Tommy does it, honestly. It's dizzying, and not entirely in a good way. Tubbo shudders as he swings himself up onto a roof and lands a little less than gracefully, stumbling to his feet.

"Well, well, well, fancy meeting you here, Spider-Man," Quackity says, and Tubbo notes the way his voice wavers a bit behind the mask. Tubbo rolls his shoulders, and Quackity's gauntlet powers on, a low sort of crackling sound filling the air. Quackity lowers his voice—doesn't project it as much—so that only Tubbo can hear. "Ready, kid?"

Tubbo nods, and he fires off a couple of webs, Quackity dodging them expertly. "Been a while, Boss! Can't say I've missed that ugly mug of yours," he quips, and Quackity visibly shivers as Tommy's voice leaves his mouth. Tubbo winces apologetically, but it makes no difference; it's not like Quackity can see his face.

Quackity puts his left foot forward—punch incoming from the left—and Tubbo jumps back, just out of reach of Quackity's gauntlet. They exchange a few more staged punches, and Tubbo accidentally gets a good one off on Quackity's jaw. He'd normally feel more sorry about it, but he's had one hell of a week, and he's still rightfully pissed.

"Uh, *ow*," Quackity grits out, and Tubbo squints at him. Quackity has the decency to look a bit sheepish now, and he puts his right foot forward. Tubbo dodges, and they keep going. It feels more like a ridiculously choreographed dance than a fight, and Tubbo fleetingly thinks that this is kind of fun.

Then, of course, his foot slips ever-so-slightly, and Quackity's fist careens into his side.

Holy *shit*, this is a *low* setting?!

Tubbo's stomach lurches, and he stumbles back, fists still raised,

even as Quackity pulls back, horrified. "Come on, s'that the best you can do?" he taunts, and Quackity gives him a bewildered look. Tubbo huffs out a sigh, and his teeth chatter with the electrified shudder that runs through him. "It's not over yet, Boss."

They need to make this believable. Yeah, Tubbo's a bit hurt at the moment, but it's not bad; they'd taken precautions to make sure of that. "You think you can handle it?" Quackity asks, phrasing it like banter for the crowd below, but Tubbo picks up on what it actually is-confirmation.

"Remind me again how long I've been kicking your ass for?" Tubbo shoots back, and Quackity's brows shoot up amusedly.

Tubbo dodges, throws a punch, ducks a kick, throws two more punches. He's very much out of breath. How the fuck does Tommy *improvise* this shit?! "Quick wit," Quackity commends quietly, and Tubbo gives him a nod. He throws his next punch, and Quackity takes it instead of dodges it. "Beat me up, dude."

"Sorry?" Tubbo asks, laughing a little, and Quackity pretends to stumble back, staggering even though he doesn't need to. "You want me to beat you up?"

"Yeah, man. Spider-Man's gotta win somehow," he mutters, and he straightens up. Tubbo's always thought that Quackity's had a knack for dramatics, but he's being *really* theatrical, head held high with a manic sort of gleam in his eye. "Quit holding back, Spidey! I'm getting *bored*."

Tubbo huffs out a laugh at that. Alright, he can do this. He dives for Quackity, tackling him to the ground. Quackity chuckles under his breath and the two of them fake-grapple for the upper hand, and Tubbo fires a web off at Quackity's mask. The synthetic web sticks to it differently than Tommy's webs. Tubbo makes a face, and he leaps back.

"Think we've got enough to let you retreat?" Tubbo asks, trying to catch his breath, because holy shit, fighting is exhausting.

Quackity nods, and he flips the electricity crackling across the metal

gauntlet on and off sporadically. Tubbo's brows furrow in confusion, and Quackity winks at him. "Shit, my gauntlet!" he says, and he staggers back towards the edge of the rooftop, giving Tubbo another nod. "We'll have to catch up later, Spider-Man. I've places to be."

He leaps off, boots launching him practically halfway across the city. Tubbo hears cheers from the street, and he gives the crowd below a two-fingered salute. "Your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man is back!" he cheers, almost choking on his words as it's Tommy's voice he hears, because it's something *Tommy* says, something he's *heard* Tommy say before, not just his own words in Tommy's voice.

Tubbo takes a deep breath and swings off. Since he's so exhausted, it's even more nauseating than it had been earlier. But he's just got to get home, that's all. He's made his appearance, kept up Tommy's image, and all he has to do now is get home. Puffy's home today, thankfully, so he'll be able to explain everything to her, and knowing her, she's probably already cooked dinner.

He swings above a crowd-Schlatt's giving a speech, but Tubbo *really* doesn't have the mental capacity to process that right now- and he spots Ranboo at the front of it, sign held high and a megaphone in hand. Tubbo lets himself feel triumphant, even though he *is* a bit worried that Ranboo's gonna get into trouble for it.

Tubbo lands in the same alleyway that Tommy's always gone to.

He stumbles again. He really has to figure out how to stick the landing with these stupid web shooters. Tubbo rolls his shoulder and takes the mask off, heading over to the dumpster. It's a *lot* heavier to drag than Tommy makes it look. Tubbo's arms feel like noodles. He huffs and leans against the wall of the alleyway, swearing under his breath at the fact that the duffel's fallen onto the ground.

Tubbo takes out the change of clothes. Ah. He hadn't swapped out Tommy's old spares. Well, this is all he has to work with, so he sheds the suit, pulls the shorts back on, and shoves Tommy's hoodie over his head. It feels wrong. Tubbo shudders. If it had been way too big on Tommy, it's even worse on him. Tubbo doesn't know why Tommy doesn't just wear clothes that actually fit him. He should've asked.

He'll just have to ask when they get him back.

Tubbo shoves the suit and the mask into the pocket of the hoodie, and he starts to head back home. It had taken a shitload of convincing for Techno to let down the house's makeshift defenses enough to let him go home. Puffy's been busy juggling the shop and her new practice-thankfully, hiring Niki back to run the shop had lightened her load a little-and he hasn't really gotten the chance to have an actual conversation with her. They've passed each other on their respective ways out of the house a couple of times, but they're both so busy.

All of the lights in the house are off.

Tubbo's brows furrow, but he takes his keys out anyway, trying to ignore the growing dread in his gut. The door's already unlocked. Tubbo frowns, and he steps into the hall. The house is silent. "Puffy? Are you home?" he calls, only to receive no answer. "Aunt Puffy?"

There's no *Welcome home, Tubs!*

There's no *Hey, kiddo! Where've you been?*

There's no *Oh, hey! How was your day?*

There's no answer.

Tubbo sets his keys in the bowl by the door, and he heads towards the kitchen. There's no movement, no noise-only an uneasy stillness that weighs down on his chest. Tubbo slips one of the web shooters onto his wrist, just in case. If there's someone here, he's not about to go down without a fight. He glances around the kitchen, eyes drawn to a little slip of paper sitting on the counter next to the stove. Carefully picking it up, wondering why there's a blank business card in the kitchen, he turns it over.

Tubbo's heart drops into his stomach. There's nothing but a smiley face on the other side.

Automata's signature smile.

Tubbo isn't safe here anymore.

Uh oh, Puffy's gone, who could have possibly seen this one coming?

Go check out this wonderful wonderful art!!

[This amazing art](#) inspired by chapter 29 :D

[These drawings](#) of ge!Sally live in my mind rent free. These are so incredible and I adore them so much

matriarch

Chapter 65: matriarch

Puffy finds herself trapped.

CW for graphic violence, manipulation, and slight body horror

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Puffy wakes up squinting.

That's not entirely unusual for her, to be perfectly fair. She constantly forgets to close the curtains before she goes to bed, so she always wakes up with a faceful of daylight, eyes squinted as she does. But this feels different, somehow. It feels wrong.

She quickly realizes that this is because it's not daylight that's woken her. No, it's the stark white walls of a small room, the only furniture in it being an equally bright table and set of chairs. The entire room is white. Puffy sits up, looking down at herself. She's in white clothes. She had worn a sweater embroidered with tiny rainbows today. Where *is* she?

Puffy stands, wincing at the stiffness in her neck. That's likely a result of having slept on the hard floor. Damn. She tries to recount what had happened as best as she can, but the memories are all... fuzzy. Things have been so hectic lately, and she'd had the day off, she'd been cleaning and getting ready to make dinner. Tubbo had been busy-something to do with Tommy, poor thing-so Puffy had

made herself busy around the house. She had just taken out something to cook, hadn't she? And then...

Shit. Puffy can't remember.

There's no one else in the room with her. Okay, this feels off. Something bad has happened. Her first thought is that she's been kidnapped, which, admittedly, isn't entirely implausible. Obviously, Puffy hopes that this is *not* the case, but it's definitely not out of the realm of possibilities.

Especially considering that the room doesn't seem to have a door.

God, Puffy really doesn't know what to do here. She paces the length of the room, wondering if she should call out for someone. If she *has* been kidnapped, that's very likely not a good idea; she doesn't exactly want to be face-to-face with whoever did it, and if it is who she thinks it is, Puffy might lose her shit.

There's the sound of an airlock seal being broken, and part of the wall slides away. At first, Puffy doesn't recognize who it is. It's just some man in a suit and a mask covering half of his face. But then, his eyes crinkle up at the corners, like he's smiling, and Puffy's heart stutters. She recognizes those eyes. How could she not?

"Hey, Mom," he says, and he sounds so very different, his voice is almost unrecognizable, "it's been a while."

Puffy finds herself staggering back until her back hits the wall. "What did you do?" she asks, voice a hushed whisper. Had he hurt Tubbo? Foolish is overseas, surely he's safe, but Tubbo's well-being is still up in the air, and the fear that accompanies that thought is almost paralyzing.

"I don't even get a hello?" he jokes, and Puffy tries not to panic. She keeps her breathing steady, holds eye contact-she might be terrified of him, but she's not going to let him know that he still holds that power over her. He steps closer. Puffy can't run. "Stop being so dramatic, Puffy, I'm not gonna hurt you."

Her brows furrow. "You kidnapped me," she points out, and he

waves his hands dismissively, as if it's a minor inconvenience rather than a literal crime.

"I forgot we have such different definitions of what it means to be hurt," he says, and Puffy's heart picks up its pace. He sits down in one of the chairs-the door slides shut, sounds as if it's been vacuum sealed-and he gestures to the seat across from him, the one closest to her. She shakes her head in disbelief. He wants her to sit down and have a fucking *conversation*? He's deranged. He tilts his head at her curiously. "Aren't you curious?"

"About what?" she asks warily, in spite of her better judgement.

"About why you're here," he hums, tapping a finger idly on the table. Puffy stays close to the wall; there's nothing actually protecting her here, but it feels safer than sitting down at the same table. He chuckles quietly, darkly. "Puffy, please, just have a seat. You're making *me* nervous."

Puffy's jaw clenches. "Where's Tubbo?" she demands. "What did you *do*?"

Annoyingly, he doesn't answer, instead taking a pocket knife from his blazer and inspecting it almost lovingly. Puffy makes a face. "He's probably run to the Watsons by now, don't worry," he says, tracing a finger over the blade of the pocket knife, and Puffy shudders. His eyes flick back up to meet hers, and they crinkle in the corners. Puffy chokes back a wounded noise, and he chuckles again. "Geez, you really *are* scared. It's not like this is about *you*, y'know."

Puffy hesitates at that. "What do you mean?" she asks slowly. She doesn't *want* to play into his fucked up mind games, but she needs information. He tilts his head at her again, gesturing to the chair with the pocket knife. *Ah*, Puffy realizes, *this is a power play*. She's not going to give him the satisfaction. "Answer me."

"Sit down," he says, "and I will."

Fuck.

Okay, maybe she can play along for now. It's not as if he's going to lie to her-surely he knows by now not to bother, she's always been able to pick apart his lies before. It's still a bit humiliating to step away from the wall and sit down across from him, though. "Tell me what's going on-"

"You should call me Dream now, by the way," he cuts in coolly. His cadence is familiar, but his voice is completely different. Puffy wonders how he's done that. Okay, so he wants to be called Dream. She can work with that. He crosses his arms and looks at her in that terrifying, infuriating way; it's like she's a mouse, and he's a cat that wants to play with his fucking food. "Like I said, it's not about you, and it's not about Tubbo. It's about my little brother."

Puffy's brows knit together, but she doesn't let the fear show on her face. "What do you want with Foolish?" she asks, trying to keep her cold fury contained, but Dream just laughs at her, openly so.

"Him? Oh, *God*, no, Puffy, I couldn't care less about him," Dream says, a breathy laugh lacing his voice. "I almost forgot he existed, to be completely honest with you."

While Puffy *wants* to be mad at that, she can't help but be baffled. If Dream isn't talking about Foolish, then what the hell is she doing here? Puffy watches Dream's finger trace the blade again, doing her best to ignore the pit of dread that's growing in her chest. "So who-"

"I'm talking about Tommy," he says, so very fondly, and Puffy's blood runs cold. Tommy is missing. Tommy went missing a week ago. Dream, either not noticing or pretending not to notice her immense panic, just keeps toying with the pocket knife. "You know, I wouldn't have brought you here ordinarily, but he asked for you."

"He asked for *me*?" Puffy asks skeptically, and Dream waves the hand not holding the pocket knife dismissively.

"Well, he didn't ask for *you*, he asked for a mom," he says, and Puffy's *really* confused now. What the fuck is he talking about? Dream raises a brow at her. "See, I've got him completely under my thumb. He doesn't remember anything, which is-admittedly-really good for me. Some would even call it 'lucky,' but to be honest, it

feels a little *too* easy. That's mostly why I'm entertaining this little request of his."

Puffy has no idea what the fuck Dream is talking about. "Huh?" she asks, which is the most coherent reaction her brain has supplied her with. "Tommy... asked you to kidnap me?"

Dream lets out a loud laugh at that, like there's some joke she doesn't get, and he shakes his head. "Rest assured, he's not *that* fucked up. Yet," he amends, and Puffy shudders. Dream drags the tip of the pocket knife across the width of the table. "No, no, he just has this... habit. Of asking *far* too many questions. So when he started asking me about our family, well... I didn't have the heart to lie to the kid. I told him we had a mom, and I asked him if he wanted me to get in contact. He said yes, so... now you're here."

"What the fuck," Puffy whispers, "what the *fuck*?"

Rolling his eyes, Dream leans back in the chair and flips the blade of the pocket knife open and closed, over and over again. "What else was I *supposed* to do? It's not like I could take Kristin, realistically speaking. She's hard to get alone, *and* she's been on guard ever since I brought Tommy home. It's such an inconvenience, honestly," he sighs. "A lie that's closest to the truth is the easiest to convince someone of- I mean, I don't have to tell *you* that, you're a therapist, after all- so I figured I'd just take the next biggest maternal figure in his life. And if that just so happens to be the woman that abandoned me, well... that's just an added bonus."

There are honestly no words to describe how Puffy is feeling, save for: *What the fuck*?

"You emancipated *yourself*," she says, "I tried *everything*-"

"You *let me*. You gave up on me," Dream snaps, the blade of the knife flicking out and *staying* out, and Puffy goes silent, eyes focused on the point of the metal. Dream scoffs. "God, Puffy, I'm not gonna hurt you, calm down."

Puffy flicks her gaze back up to his face. "You have a knife, and you're angry," she tells him flatly, and his eye twitches. "It's not as if

you've got the best track record when it comes to being alone with someone when you have a knife-

"Foolish wasn't strong enough," he grits out, and Puffy tries to ignore the way her eyes water at the memory of finding Foolish unconscious in a puddle of blood on the kitchen floor the first time. Dream seems to notice it, though, and his eyes just crinkle at the corners again. "He couldn't handle being my brother. He was *weak*."

"He was eight," Puffy says, voice shaking, "and you *stabbed* him-"

"I loved him," Dream corrects, like he really believes it, and Puffy shuts her eyes, neither of them acknowledging the way that a few stray tears slip down her cheeks. She blinks rapidly, and Dream shakes his head. "He wasn't my little brother. He couldn't be, he wasn't *good* enough to be. But Tommy was. At long last, I *finally* had a worthy little brother, I could *sense* it, Puffy. He was so fiesty, even when he was just a baby. Do you remember that?"

Puffy remembers. She remembers Tommy's scrunched little face, brows furrowed as he tried to talk the same way that Wilbur and Techno and Foolish were able to, only to burst into tears when all he could do was babble. She remembers his tiny fists, always protesting when he was carried, as if he was determined to walk there by himself, even if all he could do was crawl. She remembers Dream holding him, so gently, and thinking that it was finally over. That whatever had been ailing her son had finally gotten to rest.

And then when Tubbo had come home, Dream had tried to choke him in his crib.

She voices none of this. "What does that have to do with this?" she asks instead, because being around Dream is already so draining. She's being held hostage, she doesn't know why, and he's bringing back some of the most traumatic memories she has.

Dream drums his fingers on the table. "See, I knew that Tommy was always destined to be my little brother, so when you tried to bring home that imposter, I got a bit... irritated," he says, and Puffy just remembers the intensive care unit, being in tears on the phone with her brother, desperate apologies spilling from her lips like vomit.

Dream tilts his head. "That's when you started to distance me from everyone. Sent me off to a million and one therapists, inpatient facilities, all that bullshit-I don't even have to imagine how draining it was on your finances, I know you're still in debt. I was so convinced that you were trying to fix me, but you told me that nothing *needed* fixing. That I just needed to be helped. So when you finally gave up on me-

"You emancipated yourself," Puffy tries again.

"When you *gave up*," Dream says through gritted teeth, and Puffy makes a mental note of how reactive he's getting at such a simple fact, "I tried to fix myself. I had a few friends by then, of course, so when the three of us got hired to the same biological development and research firm, it seemed only natural to look for a solution there. Obviously, most of what we tried wasn't successful-it really fucked up my body, actually-but one thing... one thing had real potential, so we kept at it. I was so *convinced* that if I could regenerate whatever part of my brain was making me... the way that I was, then I'd be fixed. That's where Spider-Man comes in."

Puffy gets a bit of whiplash at that. "Spider-Man?" she asks, fearing for the poor kid's safety. She had gotten kind of attached to him after so many sessions. He's a sweet kid, and if Dream has somehow hurt him-well, Puffy can't really do anything about it, but she sure will be upset.

Dream ignores her, kicking his feet up on the table obnoxiously. Puffy, still panicking slightly, just stares at him. "Turns out that my brain was functioning like any other normal person's, according to a whole bunch of scans I had done, but that's besides the point. I was so ready to wrap up the project-most of the spiders had died, after all, so it was useless to keep them around-but then," he says, and Puffy watches his eyes sparkle with a muted sort of horror, "he showed up. Called himself Spider-Man, started fighting crime."

"You're insane," Puffy whispers.

Her words fall on deaf ears. "See, I knew that he'd been a result of my work, knew that on some level, we probably shared DNA now," he says, and he sounds so sickeningly happy about it that Puffy

feels nauseous. Dream takes his feet off the table and leans forward, eyes flicking back and forth between each of hers as she sits stock-still, terrified. "Puffy, we were basically *brothers*. I had two! I had Tommy and I had Spider-Man, and I was so *excited* to find out if Spider-Man was strong enough to be my brother."

Puffy really doesn't know what the fuck to say to that. "Uh," she says eloquently.

Dream just keeps rambling. "Obviously, I couldn't risk everyone else killing him-not until I got my hands on our most recent development, of course-so we never did anything *lethal*. Not until it was done. And you know what, Puffy?" he asks, sounding as excited as he had on the few Christmas mornings she'd had with him, and Puffy's tears slip silently down her cheeks. "Puffy, he *survived*. Everything-everything!-that I threw at him, he could handle it! No matter what it was, no matter how bad it was, he never *broke*. And when I realized that Tommy and Spider-Man were one in the same, I thought to myself, it had to be fate! From the very *beginning*, the universe had gifted me the perfect little brother!"

Okay, Puffy needs a second to process. "Tommy is Spider-Man?" she asks, voice trembling as badly as her hands, and Dream actually pauses in his ranting to acknowledge her.

"Don't tell me you haven't figured it out," Dream taunts, and Puffy balls her hands into fists in her lap.

Fuck, this explains so much. Every session, even though she'd shamed herself for thinking about it, a small part of her had wondered who the boy behind the mask had been. She had hoped it'd be a stranger. But it had been Tommy. Tommy, who she'd seen grow up, who she'd helped to *raise*. That little spitfire of a kid who'd wrecked her house regularly with Tubbo, the wonderful, kind kid who'd give anyone that looked sad a bouquet of wildflowers he'd picked from the yard. He'd been Spider-Man, and Puffy is equal parts unsurprised and horrified to know it.

Puffy swallows hard and looks away, gaze firmly on her hands. Her nail polish is chipping, has been for the past two weeks. She hadn't had the time to fix it. "Are you... the reason Tommy's missing?" she

asks, trying to phrase her words *very* carefully.

"It was *perfect*. All I had to do was break him away from what's been holding him back. At first, I tried getting him away from those friends of his," Dream says, standing and starting to pace. "I used our Enderwalk prototype on one of them-don't remember the little shit's name, I couldn't care less-and tried to frame him as a bad influence. I knew that if I could cause a rift between the two of them, make everyone think Tommy was lying, it'd get Tubbo out of the picture too, but it didn't work. Do you wanna know why it didn't work, Puffy?"

"Why?" Puffy asks breathlessly, because she can't help it. This is batshit insane.

Dream places his hands firmly on either side of the table and his eyes are manic. "Because of Tommy's *loyalty*," he says. Puffy shrinks back. "He's so *loyal*, Puffy. And that's his greatest quality, yes, but it's also his most *annoying* quality. He didn't put the blame on the other kid at all, which-I'll admit it-surprised me. I figured that a teenager about to get in major trouble would blame anybody and everybody to avoid said trouble, but Tommy's *loyalty* got in the way."

Puffy doesn't want to hear this. She doesn't want to hear Dream's twisted way of singing Tommy's praises. She wraps her arms around herself and eyes the pocket knife still in Dream's hand, pressed against the table. "I don't want to know this," she says, and Dream ignores her words yet again.

"I knew that if I could somehow take the elements of what failed in the second experiment and apply them to our resuscitation device, I could take all of Tommy's memories, make him loyal to *me*," Dream says, and Puffy's eyes go wide. She snaps her head up to look at him, but he's blind to her fear, too wrapped up in his own head. "And the time's finally come! I killed him, brought him back as a blank slate! I keep toying with his psyche, what's the word-you're a therapist, you know it, don't' you?"

"You're psychologically torturing him?" Puffy stammers out, voice weak. She can't fucking handle this. "Manipulating him?"

Dream snaps his fingers. "Exactly. And it's so *easy*! I mean,

seriously, I figured I'd have an advantage with his memory being wiped, but *God*, he's putty in my fucking hands! A little gaslighting here, a little love-bombing there, and he's falling over himself trying to be good enough to be my brother," he says, sounding amazed, and Puffy wants to throw up. Dream's excitement dims suddenly, and he snaps his gaze to Puffy, focused. "But there's another caveat to it, of *course* there is, I don't know why I hadn't seen it coming. Tommy's a social kid, craves the company of other people, and keeping him so isolated has made him... act out a few times."

Puffy fears for Tommy's safety. Well, she's *been* fearing for his safety, but especially now, especially knowing what Dream's capable of when he's angry. "What does that mean?" she asks, hushed and cautious.

"He's got quite the attitude sometimes. It's, like, ingrained in his very nature or something. It's fun to break, sure, but it's painstakingly annoying. I'm hoping he'll be less resilient if there's someone else on the line," he says, so very dismissively, as if he's not telling Puffy that she's essentially just here to be a sacrificial lamb. Dream sits back down in the chair, and he's toying with the fucking knife again. "I'm going to craft him into the perfect weapon."

"Why are you telling me this?" Puffy asks, trying to keep her voice steady even as her eyes fill with angry tears.

Dream's eyes crinkle at the corners. Puffy's getting real sick and tired of that shit. "Because you're gonna play the part of loving mother, and you're not gonna speak a word of this," he says, all easy confidence, and Puffy narrows her eyes. Dream just leans back in his seat with complete nonchalance. "I mean, you *could* try, but... that wouldn't end very well for the kids you actually acknowledge, would it? I know I could just hurt you directly, that's always an option, but I doubt it'll actually make anything stick, y'know? You tend to respond... better... when it's someone you care about getting hurt in your stead. So when you break the rules"- he stabs the knife into the table, and Puffy jumps-"you'll have to watch Tommy suffer the consequences."

"You're sick," Puffy tells him. "You're a *monster*."

Dream pries the knife from the table and pockets it, moving around the table to take hold of her face and look down at her as though he's bored. "I'm not a monster," he says, "I'm your son."

He walks towards the door and presses a button. "Yes?" a man's voice crackles over the speaker, and Puffy wants to scrub her face clean.

"George, would you bring Theseus in here for me?" Dream asks, sounding like a completely different person, and Puffy has the sinking feeling that 'Theseus' isn't the real name of whoever it is that Dream's just asked for. Dream turns back to her, hand off the button, and Puffy curls in on herself a bit. "Oh. Forgot to tell you about that little detail, did I? Right. Tommy is Theseus now, got it?"

Puffy's mind just keeps replaying the image of Dream slamming the knife into the table as she nods. "His name is Theseus," she repeats, figuring that it's easier to play along now and try to subtly help Tommy later.

She gets a brief nod in return, and a heavy silence hangs in the air. It's not as if Puffy could overpower him; Dream's physically much stronger than she is, *and* he's got a weapon. If it weren't for the knife, Puffy probably would've tried. She'd have failed, but at least she'd have tried. Now, though, she just sits in the chair and waits. Plays along, like a coward. Plays it safe, like a parent.

The door does its pressurized open and close, and Puffy's heart sinks when she sees Tommy. He looks even skinnier than he had before, hair long and messy with an odd white streak towards the front. That's not even the worst part, though. The scars that peek out of the clothes that hang loose on his frame, the way he's slouched like he's trying to take up as little space as possible, the way his face absolutely lights up when Dream puts a hand on his shoulder-none of that even compares to the blindfold wrapped around his head.

Even his senses are under Dream's control.

Dream smiles and mumbles something to Tommy, guiding him into the chair across from Puffy and standing directly behind him. "Theseus, this is Puffy," he says, keeping his gaze firmly on Puffy's

face, and Puffy pretends not to notice. "She's our mom."

Tommy's shaky smile turns up at the corners; he kind of laughs into it, the way he always has when he's excited about something. "Hi, Mum," he says, so earnestly, and Puffy bites down hard on her bottom lip to focus on the pain of that rather than the pain settled in her chest. "I-It's nice to meet you. Well, I guess 'meet' isn't the right word, obviously it's not, I just-see, the thing is, I don't remember much, so-"

"She already knows, Theseus," Dream says. "You're rambling again."

"Sorry," Tommy says automatically, like it's a trained response. A scared voice in Puffy's mind reminds her that it's only been a week since he'd gone missing. Tommy puts his hands on the table, gently and hesitantly, and he glances behind his shoulder, like he can sense that Dream's there. Knowing what she knows now about him, Puffy wouldn't be surprised if that's exactly the case. "C-Can I...?"

Dream's eyes are still glued to Puffy. "Yeah, buddy," he says easily, and Puffy doesn't understand how he can sound so warm when his eyes are like ice, "go ahead."

Tommy extends his hands a little, turns them over so that his palms are facing up, and Puffy idly realizes that he wants her to put her hands in his. She does, trying her hardest to blink away her tears at the way he beams at the slight affection. "Hi, Theseus," she says softly, hating the way the alias sounds coming from her.

"I'm so excited to finally get to talk to you," Tommy says, just as soft. "Dream says you were really busy, a-and I really hope it's not an inconvenience or anything to come visit. Um, if it's okay, can I ask you something?"

Puffy has the feeling that he's not asking *her* if it's okay. Dream clicks his tongue. "Make it quick," he says, and Tommy nods.

God, Puffy hates this.

"Right! I just... I wanted to know what I was like...? As a kid, I mean.

Was I always so sick, or is this... is it recent?" Tommy asks, and Puffy has no idea what he's talking about.

"You've always been sick, Theseus," Dream cuts in. "If you're going to ask her questions, don't waste her time with questions that I can just answer for you."

Puffy gives Tommy's hands a light squeeze. "It's okay, I don't mind," she tells him, and Dream's eyes narrow. She clears her throat. "Hm. As a kid, you were... well, you were a lot like you are now. You're still a kid, obviously, but when you were little, you were just as much of a firecracker. And... you loved that stuffed cow that we got you. Do you remember that?"

It's an innocuous enough detail, surely Dream can't get mad at *that*. After all, he doesn't know anything about amnesia or the different types of it, so if she can help Tommy recall his memories-if she's careful about it-then they can start working on a plan to get out of here.

"No, I-I don't think I do, I'm sorry," Tommy says, laughing a little nervously.

Puffy's brows furrow in determination. "What about-"

"Mom, please, stop bombarding him," Dream says, hands on Tommy's shoulders, and Puffy's mouth snaps shut. "The doctors say that he's fragile right now. Trying to recall too many things at once could *seriously hurt him*."

Fuck.

"Right, you're right, I'm-I really am sorry, Theseus," Puffy says, the name tasting like bile, and Tommy just smiles gently at her.

"It's alright," he tells her, "no big deal."

Puffy gives his hands another squeeze. "You used to like playing in the rain," she says, hoping that Dream will let this one go, because she isn't even *trying* to jog his memory. "We could do that again, if you'd like. When it rains next."

Unfortunately for her, Dream's eyes narrow. "Theseus," he says, and Tommy looks up at him, that smile still on his face, "I think Mom just suggested you break the rules."

Whatever rule she'd broken, it *can't* be good, judging by the way Tommy's face falls. "Oh," he says quietly. "I-I can't go outside, Mum. I'm too sick."

"I'm gonna give you a choice here, Theseus," Dream says quietly, eyes still fixed on Puffy as he puts an arm around Tommy's shoulders. "You can either let Mom face the consequences for it-for breaking the rules-or you can take it on her behalf. It's up to you, but... I don't know if I want such a bad influence around you. I think you shouldn't see her again until she's learned her lesson."

Oh, that is *evil*.

He's framing it as if it's Tommy's choice, as if he hadn't just bragged to Puffy that he'll hurt Tommy in front of her to fuck with her. And he's cornering Tommy into choosing to take whatever fucked-up 'consequence' this turns out to be by threatening him with further isolation. Puffy gives Dream a pleading look, trying to convey that she hadn't *meant* to break that rule, hadn't even known it had fucking existed, but he ignores her.

"No, no, please, I-I'll take it, please let her stay," Tommy says. "She's still learning, Dream, y-you said she's been busy, right? So maybe-surely she's just a little scatter-brained right now, I'll take the consequences, just please, *please* let her stay, I'll-"

"Alright, calm down, you're being dramatic," Dream says with a teasing tone, but Puffy can see the malice in his eyes.

With one swift movement, he clamps his hand over Tommy's chin and mouth and forces his head up towards the ceiling, pulling his pocket knife out of his pocket with his other hand.

Tommy's hands grapple at Dream's arm, and Dream swiftly slices the blade across his knuckles; Tommy drops his hands to the table again. Puffy watches with paralyzing terror as the skin heals over almost instantaneously. "What are you doing?" Puffy asks in a

hushed, horrified whisper, and Dream's eyes crinkle at the corners.

The blade slices across Tommy's throat in what feels like slow motion.

Puffy squeezes her eyes shut.

There's something warm and damp on her face and on her hands, on her clothes and in her hair.

She doesn't want to open her eyes again, but Dream kicks the table into her, and it startles her into doing so. Puffy can't even bring herself to scream. Tommy's chest isn't moving. He's not breathing. There's blood *everywhere*, staining the pristine white room in splatters of crimson.

The gash in Tommy's throat visibly starts to close itself over. It's a morbid thing to watch-the veins closing up, the muscle fibers weaving back together, scar tissue sealing over the gap in the skin. Puffy gags at that, gags at the copper smell of the blood too, and Dream rolls his eyes, letting Tommy's head loll back as he lets go of his chin.

"Don't start crying now, Puffy, you had to have seen this coming," he says casually, as if he hasn't just slit Tommy's fucking throat, and Puffy tries to do anything other than sit in stunned, mortified silence as Dream takes a bandage from his pocket and starts wrapping it around Tommy's head. Once he's done that, he takes a small device-it's almost reminiscent of a pocket journal, stark white in Dream's red-stained hand-out of the same pocket. "Do you know what this is?"

Puffy just stares at the angry pink scar across Tommy's neck. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" she chokes out, and Dream huffs out a laugh.

"It's not as if he's gonna *stay* dead, Puffy. Since his body can heal so efficiently, I can do whatever the fuck I want in terms of bodily harm, and my little device can bring him back so long as I use it within half an hour," Dream tells her, waving the thing back and forth, and Puffy reaches a shaking hand up to her cheek to wipe

some of the blood from her face. Dream's eyes crinkle again, *really* crinkle, like he's grinning ear to ear. "I decide whether he lives or dies, and I can bring him *back to life*. I'm a fucking *god*."

"You're fucking deranged," Puffy tells him, voice shaking something horrible. "You fucking-you *killed* him!"

"Technically, *you* killed him," Dream says. "I *did* warn you about what would happen if you broke the rules. But to be honest, it doesn't really matter in the long run. He could die a thousand times, for all I care. I'll always be here to bring him back, and he'll always be here to be my perfect weapon. My perfect little brother."

"This isn't real," Puffy whispers to herself, "it can't be real."

Dream places the thing-the device-in the middle of Tommy's chest and pushes down on the beveled metal symbol in the middle of it.

After a moment, Tommy gasps for breath, coughing and clutching at his throat, and Dream puts the device back in his pocket. "Oh my God, Theseus, are you okay?!" Dream asks as he gently pulls Tommy's hands away from his neck, and Tommy sobs, clearly terrified. Dream reaches up to touch the unnecessary bandages he'd wrapped around Tommy's head, and Puffy can barely find space in her shock to be wary. "You passed out and hit your head pretty hard there."

"W-Wh-you-!" Tommy cuts himself off, abruptly scrambling back and away from Dream. In Puffy's dazed state, she registers that it had seemed involuntary.

"Did you have another nightmare?" Dream prods, and Tommy folds in on himself, sinking down to the floor. Dream settles beside him, keeping a wary eye on Puffy, even though she literally cannot bring herself to move. "Theseus, you're okay. You're alright. Let's get you back to bed, yeah? I can have Ponk bring you something to help with your nightmares. You'll feel better once you've rested up."

Puffy stares. She just keeps staring. Her mind wants to react, but her body won't move.

Tommy shakes his head. “No, no, that’s not-it was *real*, I *know* it was real,” he whimpers, fingers clutching at his hair. Puffy barely registers that another lock of it has turned white.

Dream rubs a hand over Tommy’s back. “I think your brain’s playing tricks on you again,” he whispers, and Tommy lets out a strangled sob. Dream helps him up. “We’ll be back later, Mom, but Theseus is really freaked out right now. That nightmare must’ve been bad. Surely you understand.”

Puffy watches them go without a word.

She doesn’t move until someone comes in to clean up the blood, and even then, all she does is sit in a corner of the room, arms wrapped around her knees as she brings them up to her chest and prays that her mind will stop reliving that moment in the kitchen.

The gash in Tommy’s throat had looked just like the one in Foolish’s chest from all those years ago.

Poor Puffy...

On a much lighter note, y'all should check out [this](#) art of ge!Tubbo :D

letting the days go by (let the water hold me d...

Chapter 66: letting the days go by (let the water hold me down)

Tommy gets acquainted with a rather... shocking... spider.

CW for violence, manipulation, abuse (and also Tommy goes on a bit of a hunger strike but he doesn't want to)

Also, there was a comment on the last chapter-I couldn't find it this morning but if it was you then hi :D-asking if I could add a little summary of the stuff that happened in the chapter to the end notes (bc the angst in these facility sections is v heavy) and I think that's a great idea!! I'll be doing that from now on, so if the angst is a bit much for you, don't worry! I'll give you the sparknotes version at the end from now on lol

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Theseus is, admittedly, a little tired of being poked at with needles.

Obviously, he knows that he needs these treatments, but honestly, getting some of his skin sliced away with a scalpel so that the doctors can test it and examine it hadn't exactly been a great experience. And, as Ponk sticks the larger, more hollow needles in his wrists, relieving some of the tension there as Theseus sits in bed, he's abruptly reminded that needles are always unpleasant, especially when they're under his skin.

"Are you comfortable?" Ponk asks quietly, and he pushes something into Theseus's hand. It's a bottle of water, and Theseus smiles gently as he nods. He takes a few sips. His stomach has been kind of uneasy lately, but he can handle water for sure. Ponk taps his arm. "I'm gonna take your pressure, if that's okay?"

"Yeah, that's fine," Theseus says. He sips the water some more, patiently waiting as Ponk takes his blood pressure. The moments that he gets with Ponk are nice; Ponk is quite funny, and he always has a way of making all the needles and blood tests bearable, which Theseus really appreciates. It sucks that he's got to be blindfolded when it happens, though, but Ponk needs the proper lighting to take care of things, so Theseus doesn't complain. Well, he doesn't complain *too* much. He sets the water bottle to the side with the hand not set in the pulse tracker, and Ponk takes the blood pressure cuff from his arm. "So? What's the verdict, doc? How's my health looking?"

"The same as it always is, Theseus," Ponk answers, and Theseus pouts. He says that every time, and Theseus is starting to suspect that it's not entirely the truth. Ponk ruffles his hair, and Theseus flinches, just a little, but only because it had been unexpected. "Alright, kid, I'll go see if I can't get you something to eat."

Theseus reaches for Ponk's wrist, swallowing nervously. "Um, i-if it's alright, can you ask Dream not to give me something sweet this time? I... I keep telling him that I don't like sweet stuff, but I don't think he really understands just how *much* I don't like it," he chuckles, and Ponk gives his hand a brief squeeze in reassurance. Theseus beams up at him. "Thanks, Ponk!"

"Yeah, man, I got your back," Ponk says. There's a slight *click* of a noise, and Ponk takes Theseus's blindfold off. "There you go, buddy. I'll be back in a bit."

Theseus nods, and he turns his head away from the door as it opens and closes again. Idly, he wonders how Puffy's doing. He'd had such a terrible nightmare after fainting that first visit-Dream had said it must've been because of all the excitement of the day putting so much stress on his body-and he must've given her a terrible first impression. Well, he supposes it's not a *first* impression, given that

she's his mother, but it's hard to remember that he hadn't been meeting her for the first time just then. At least they've had a few more conversations since then to make up for it.

His hair falls into his face as he turns his head again, and Theseus scrunches his nose up in distaste as he realizes it's been a couple of days since he'd last washed his hair. Theseus reaches for the little panel on the cuff and taps one of the buttons, patiently waiting for an answer.

"What is it, Theseus?" Dream says, voice a bit grainy-sounding as it comes from the speaker overhead.

"I could do with a bath," Theseus calls, unsure of where the microphone in his room is. It's a little unsettling to have one at all, but it's also comforting, in a way. If he ever needs anything, all he has to do is call out for it. That's what Dream had told him anyway, when he'd asked about why the room is bugged. There's an uneasy silence, and Theseus swallows nervously. "Um, Dream? C-Can I... get up and take a bath? Please?"

The silence stretches on.

Theseus glances towards the bathroom and makes a face as his hair brushes against his shoulders and a piece of it clings to the side of his jaw. There's a noise from the intercom, and the cuff around his wrist releases with a pressurized click. Theseus rubs at the skin there, thumb catching slightly on the raised bit. He doesn't like looking at the mark there. Something about it-looking at it in a bed, one hand resting on the covers-makes his head feel fuzzy.

"Are you just gonna sit there, or are you gonna take a bath? Because I could just put the cuff back on," Dream teases, and Theseus shakes his head, standing on shaky legs.

"No, no, I-I'm going, I just... zoned out. Thank you," he adds quickly, and the intercom goes quiet, no more white noise coming over the speakers.

He stands from the bed, wincing as his vision swims a bit. When was the last time he'd eaten? If he remembers correctly, he'd eaten

last night. At least, he *thinks* it's a new morning. Dream had said it's a new morning. When had he eaten before the stew from last night? Maybe... two days before then? But that can't be right. Dream wouldn't space food out for that long, it would be bad for his sickness, wouldn't it?

Still, it's difficult to stand without swaying a bit on the spot. Theseus wonders if this is just another side effect. The treatments-they've been non-stop lately. Or that's what it feels like, at least-have a good few side effects to them, and Theseus is having kind of a hard time adjusting. It's for his health, though, so he can deal with them. He can handle it, because it'll help him get better, and Dream wants him to get better. Everyone wants him to get better.

Theseus carefully makes his way to the bathroom and takes a shaky breath. There's no mirror above the sink-why does he think there should be one?-so he's never really sure whether he looks presentable. He supposes it doesn't really matter. The only people that see him are his doctors and his family, after all. Still, though, it'd be nice to see himself. At least, he *thinks* it'd be nice. He hopes he looks more like Puffy than Dream.

He's not sure why he hopes that, but he does.

Theseus draws himself a bath and sits on the counter to wait for the basin of the tub to fill up. It might take a while. He runs a hand through his hair, making a face when his fingers get caught in a couple of knots. There's a brush on the other side of the counter-it's right next to his toothbrush, actually-so Theseus takes it and gently brushes out the knots and the tangles in his hair. He's kind of surprised at how soft it gets. Dream always says it feels like hay whenever he yanks Theseus by the hair.

It's not ever undeserved, only to get Theseus in the direction of where he needs to be when he's not listening, or to snap him out of his thoughts if he's caught up in his own head, and Dream always apologizes afterwards, always helps him tie his hair up out of his face. Honestly, it's not even that big a deal, Theseus *likes* having his hair long, he could braid it if he really wants to-

Crack.

There's a deep, spindly line going up the handle of the hairbrush. It's barely noticeable in the dark. Theseus swears under his breath. He hadn't meant to break it. Even if it's not *really* broken, it's just a crack, surely Dream won't mind. It had been an accident, hadn't it? And it's because Theseus had remembered something, so really, it's just a good thing!

The swelling sort of feeling in his chest is the real signifier of it, of the fact that he'd managed to remember. Theseus doesn't quite know what it is, but the thought of a braid makes him feel... something. What does he feel? What memory is tied to the elusive emotion? Shit, he's lost the already hardly-there grasp on the memory. It's slipped away from him again.

There's a slight splashing noise to his right, and Theseus swears again as he rushes to drain some of the water from the tub. It gets back down to a more manageable level, and he breathes a sigh of relief. At least he hasn't made *that* much of a mess. Nothing a few towels can't fix right up. It's not a big deal. Theseus assures himself that it'll be fine.

When he steps into the bath, he lets himself sink down, keeping his eyes to the ceiling. He hates looking down at himself, at the myriad of scars across almost every inch of his skin. Sometimes he wonders what they're from. The accident that had cost him his memory is surely the cause of some of them, but he wonders how he'd gotten the others. There's one on his stomach-a big, abstract thing that kind of looks like a star if he squints really hard-that makes him shudder every time he looks at it. There are little lightning-bolt ones running down his forearms, too, though those are a lot more faded than most.

For some reason, the idea of having been electrocuted is a little funny to him. It feels so improbable, but there's this insistence at the back of his head that it had happened.

Theseus sinks a little lower into the water, the line of it coming up to the bottom of his nose. He still keeps his eyes on the ceiling, though, even as his hair starts to float around him, sticking to his face as the water laps in waves at his cheeks. He blows air through his mouth and laughs a little as the water bubbles.

There's a flash of something again. A memory, just barely out of reach. An inflatable pool with a gaudy pattern in the backyard, someone trying to teach him how to blow bubbles. It's probably Dream, isn't it? But no, Dream's hair isn't brown, neither are his eyes. Dream doesn't wear glasses, either. Then... an old friend? But that can't be right. Theseus doesn't have any friends.

Maybe before he'd gotten sick, he'd had a friend. Maybe.

He'll ask Dream about it later.

It's easier to close his eyes and let the suds of the soap wash away the uneasy feeling in his chest, and Theseus makes a mental note to thank whoever had the idea to keep the towels warm. He really does hate the cold. It makes him even more tired than he usually feels. When he's changed into a clean pair of clothes, he kind of wishes he'd just stayed wrapped up in the towel. The room's always quite chilly; Dream says it's to help keep the doctors' tools sterile, but Theseus isn't entirely convinced that's the truth.

Then, of course, he feels like an asshole for doubting Dream, because why on earth would Dream lie to him about that?

Theseus glances back over at the slowly-draining tub. It would be nice to just... submerge himself in the warm water. Hibernate there, maybe. He doesn't want to *drown*, obviously, but the warmth of the tub is better-feels more welcoming-than the cold, static air of his bedroom. It's almost funny, in a way. The water had felt sturdy, but Theseus feels disoriented now that his feet are actually on the ground. He wonders if it's something to do with the feeling of weightlessness.

His room is still empty when he comes out of the bathroom. Ponk hasn't returned, as it would seem. Theseus moves over to his desk, sitting down in the chair there. He'll go back to his bed in a minute, Dream can see him on the cameras, surely, so he won't get in trouble if he just sits in a different place for a bit. This is as diverse as his options get.

Theseus taps his fingers on the wood of the desk, trying to see if he can make a rhythm. He likes music. He knows that much about

himself, at least. Dream plays the guitar, doesn't he? Theseus had regained a partial memory of listening to a guitar a couple of days ago during a visit with Puffy. Dream had gotten upset with Puffy for interrogating him again, but Theseus hadn't felt overwhelmed or anything. He must've fainted and hit his head again after that, because he'd had another one of those awful, awful nightmares.

Absentmindedly running a hand over the dip in his collarbones, *Dream's knife went right through, it had sliced through his bones like butter*, Theseus shudders and shakes the memory of the nightmare from his mind. He keeps tapping the desk. *It had sliced him open, down to his sternum, everything kept closing up so fast it had felt impossible*. Theseus takes a deep breath and grips the desk instead. *There'd still been dried blood on him when he'd woken up, he knows it's real, he knows it's not a nightmare, Dream had stabbed him when he'd gotten fed up with trying to open up his chest, had stabbed him right in the lung, Theseus had drowned, choking on his own blood to the tune of Puffy's sobs-*

Theseus swears loudly as he grips the table so hard it digs a gash into his palm.

It heals over instantaneously.

Theseus feels nauseous.

He shuts his eyes instinctively as the door starts to open again. There are heavy footsteps, and his blindfold is placed over his eyes again. "Good morning," he says quietly, because he doesn't want to be rude to whoever it is that's come to fetch him.

"Morning, Theseus," George hums, patting him gently on the shoulder. Theseus quite likes George. He's nice, if not a little bit of a stickler for Dream's rules. Dream seems to trust him, which is enough for Theseus to trust him. George helps him up, and Theseus leans on him a little as George guides him down a hall. "You've got another treatment today."

"I haven't eaten yet, though," Theseus says, and George huffs out a half-laugh. "George, I'm serious, I-I didn't get anything today."

George hesitates for a moment-Theseus stumbles a bit at the abrupt stop-but he just sighs and continues on within a moment. "That's not my problem," he mumbles, probably not for Theseus to hear, but he hears it anyway. Theseus frowns, but he says nothing as George leads him into a room and helps him up onto an observation table. "There you go. Behave yourself, yeah? I don't want to hear any complaints from Dream, so don't give the doctors any problems."

"You say this as if I've ever caused trouble for you," Theseus jokes, and George shoves his head lightly to the side.

"Careful, now," Dream says from somewhere off to his right, and Theseus ignores the terrified sort of feeling at the back of his mind, "don't smack him around too much. Precious cargo, and all that."

Part of Theseus wants to point out the fact that Dream had rather unceremoniously tossed him to the floor of his room the other day and left without saying goodbye, but Theseus buries the sudden urge. Dream had just been having a bad day. Instead, he smiles weakly and wraps his arms around himself, only to have them quickly and efficiently strapped down to either side of the observation table.

"I-Is it really necessary this time? Haven't I sat still for most of them?" Theseus pleads as someone straps his ankles down. Honestly, he never *means* to squirm, but sometimes the treatments really *are* painful. He's more than aware that they're his only hope at getting better, but that doesn't make it any less unbearable. Theseus turns in the direction of where *something* in his brain is telling him Dream is. "Please, Dream, I've-

"Been good, yeah, I know. It's not actually your fault this time, I'm just worried about... this new treatment," Dream says coolly, a hand on Theseus's shoulder, and Theseus wants to flinch away, but he can't. Why had he wanted to flinch? There's no need. Dream's been really nice lately. He's just been kind of stressed. "Theseus, buddy, stay very still for the doctors, okay?"

Someone rolls his sleeve up to his shoulder and swabs something damp over a very specific spot on his bicep. "It's gonna be over before you know it, T," Ponk whispers to his left, and someone's

hand briefly squeezes his thumb before the touch is gone.

"The vein is prepped," Hannah says monotonously from the same side as Ponk, and Dream gives Theseus's shoulder a quick pat. Hannah seems to hesitate for just a moment before sticking a few of those weird heart monitor pads on him. "Are we... gonna leave him alone while it happens?"

"Please don't," Theseus says, mentally cursing the way his voice sounds much smaller than himself. "Please don't leave me, Dream, I-I'm... I'm scared. Please don't leave."

It feels humiliating to admit it, but he's petrified. He doesn't *want* another spider bite, doesn't even understand how they're beneficial to his health. There's a hand delicately smoothing down his hair. It's still damp. It sticks to his cheeks. "I'm sorry, Theseus," Dream says, and a vindictive part of Theseus whispers that he doesn't sound very sorry at all, "but I have to. It's for everyone's safety. You don't wanna be selfish, do you?"

Dream's hand had been around his throat. He'd slammed Theseus's head into the ground and his eyes had narrowed, as if it were disgusting to even look at Theseus. "You're so fucking selfish," he'd snarled, and Puffy had cried silently in the corner of the room, hands over her mouth, barely visible in the dim light. Theseus had tried to reach out for her before Dream had slammed his head into the ground again. Theseus had woken up a day later with a massive migraine. Dream had been at his bedside. "You had me worried sick! You had such a terrible nightmare, Theseus. Do you feel better?"

Theseus shakes his head. "N-No, of course I don't," he says, and Dream's hand brushes his still-wet bangs away from his face.

"Good. That's good," Dream says, and Theseus hates how easily he's made happy by such a small affirmation. Three pairs of footsteps retreat, and Theseus resists the urge to call out for Dream.

He waits, cringing at the way his lashes brush against the blindfold. There's that familiar sort of buzzing at the back of his head. It's getting more and more frantic, and Theseus *knows* the spider's

there before he feels it. God, he fucking hates it when they use the spiders. The stupid thing is crawling on his fucking ankle, scuttering over the fabric of his trousers.

Well, it's rather rude to call the spider stupid, it's not the *spider's* fault it's here.

Theseus is fairly certain that he's developed arachnophobia, though, given the rising panic in his chest as the spider clambers over his wrist and heads straight for the swabbed patch of his upper arm. *Please*, he thinks, up towards whatever will listen to him, *just let this be easy*.

The spider's fangs pierce his skin, and a scream rips from his throat as liquid lightning courses through his veins, white-hot and furious.

The pain is worse-far worse-than any of the other spiders thus far. Theseus dry-heaves, body forcibly wrenching upwards as he chokes out a sob. His limbs twitch in an alarmingly violent manner, as if he's just had a defibrillator set off on his chest and it hasn't turned off yet. His muscles feel as if they're ripping apart at the seams and rapidly trying to patch themselves back together, and Theseus lurches forward again like he's fucking possessed or something.

The restraints rip right out of the observation table, and Theseus stumbles to the floor, retching around gasps and screams. A brutal shockwave courses through him, and Theseus vomits nothing but watery, acidic bile onto the floor, his entire body twitching. The back of his mind *screams*, and Theseus cries out as something indescribable fucking *erupts* out of him.

This is what death must feel like. This must be it. He must be about to die, because there'd be no other reason for this kind of pain, this horrible, festering static overtaking his brain, his muscles, the fucking pores of the spongy bits in his bones. There's *venom* coursing through him, he knows that's what it is, but it feels like agony and a thunderstorm wrapped into one.

Something is horribly wrong.

He hears someone in the other room shout something about the

lights, about the cameras, but Theseus just clamps his hands over his ears and screams again, dissolving into sobs as another sharp pain shocks through him. He curls into himself and grips at his still-fucking-wet hair, jumping in surprise at the sensation of static there, too.

Theseus writhes in pain for far too long before his body finally gives into its exhaustion.

“Theseus. Eat.”

The instruction is clear, but Theseus can't bring himself to listen. “M'not hungry,” he mumbles, eyelids drooping. His head is yanked up by his hair, and Theseus doesn't so much as wince. He's gotten used to it, and the pain of Dream wrenching his head up is nothing compared to the fierce numbness that's settled in the cavity of his chest. “I'm not hungry, Dream.”

Dream scoffs, and the hold on his head is dropped so abruptly that Theseus has to make a conscious effort not to let himself fall face-first into the watered-down soup. He's hungry. He's really fucking hungry. But he's too tired to eat. It feels like the days are getting longer, more arbitrary, and the nights are too short to get any proper sleep. Theseus knows that it's probably his sickness that's disorienting his circadian rhythm, but it still fucking sucks.

“Are you just gonna waste all this food?” Dream asks, a warning sort of tone in his voice, and Theseus doesn't even respond, too busy concentrating on trying to keep his eyes open. Dream snaps his fingers in front of Theseus's face, but Theseus can't react, not even when that feeling at the back of his head thrums uneasily. “Hey, I'm *talking* to you. You know, you really oughta be grateful you're getting food at all after that little tantrum you had last week. And you're *still* pretending to be depressed about it? Do you just hate me? Is that it? Is that why you're doing this to me?”

“I don't hate you,” Theseus says automatically, and one of the bits of stringy, pale meat in the stew sinks below the surface. Surely it hasn't been a week yet. It hasn't even felt like more than three days-

well, three days if he's measuring by the time it had taken for a day to go by about two days ago. Fuck, that's confusing. Thinking about it is just contributing to his headache. "I'm just not hungry, Dream."

Dream seems upset. Theseus is too tired to care. "What, are you just gonna fucking starve yourself to death?! Is this your shitty attempt at a teenage rebellion? Because let me tell you *right now*, that's not gonna happen," he snaps, and Theseus just stares down at the bowl of gross, *gross* stew. Dream snaps his fingers in front of Theseus's face again. "Are you even listening to me?!"

Theseus blinks. His eyes feel dry. "I'm tired," he says quietly. "I think I want to go to bed."

Dream takes Theseus's hand in both of his own. "Please," he begs, and Theseus is vaguely surprised to see him switching tactics so quickly, "just eat *something*. You don't want me to have to watch you wither away, do you? You don't want to do that to me, right?"

Theseus looks down at their hands. This is the most genuine affection he's gotten in ages, and it feels like nothing. If it were a taste, he'd say it tastes like plain potatoes. *But that's not right*, something in his mind whispers, *you love the taste of... whose potatoes were they again? Why can't you remember?* Theseus is too drowsy to even care about the memory slipping just out of reach. He blinks again. It requires too much effort.

"I don't," he agrees.

He eats.

Silently, slowly, he manages to force himself to eat.

It's a fucking ordeal.

"There you go," Dream says, tucking a strand of a lighter patch of hair behind Theseus's ear, and his eyes crinkle up at the corners. Theseus likes it when Dream is nice to him. It's better than when he pisses Dream off and gets in trouble. It's better than when Puffy breaks the rules by accident and he takes the fall. He doesn't want her to get hurt, doesn't want Dream to stop letting her visit him.

Dream nods towards the steadily depleting bowl of stew. "See? That wasn't so hard, now, was it?"

Theseus disagrees. He thinks that picking the stupid fucking spoon up is one of the hardest things he's ever done. "When will I be well enough to go outside?" he asks once he's managed to stuff the rest of the stew down his gullet. He doesn't look at Dream, too afraid of seeing the expression on the sliver of his face that's visible.

Dream's hand grips his shoulder. Theseus tries and fails to keep himself from flinching. It's clear that Dream notices, given that his hold on Theseus tightens. "You should really stop asking that," he says, a clear warning even though he keeps his tone light, and Theseus swallows nervously. "I don't know if you'll ever be well enough, Theseus."

Theseus stares down at the bowl. "Sorry for asking," he mumbles, and Dream's hand leaves his shoulder. Theseus feels guilty for being relieved. Theseus nudges the now-empty bowl. "I'm done eating."

"Give me your hand," Dream says, and Theseus does, making no protest as Dream locks him in the cuff. Dream ruffles a hand through his hair again. "Be good until Ponk comes to get more samples for blood tests, alright?"

"I will," Theseus murmurs, leaning back against the headrest of the bed and turning his gaze to the ceiling. He's tired, even after having eaten. He doesn't really want to do much of anything, a numb sort of resignation settled behind his lungs. Even talking feels draining.

When Ponk comes by after what feels like hours, Theseus hasn't moved.

"You feelin' alright, T?" Ponk asks him, and Theseus just hums. He doesn't want to be rude, but honestly, he doesn't want to talk. Ponk gives his hand a gentle squeeze. The corners of Theseus's mouth twitch up, but he doesn't move otherwise. Ponk seems worried. "Hey, have you eaten? Your vitals are, uh... they're a little on the not-good side of things."

Theseus knows he shouldn't parrot Dream, but he *really* doesn't want to talk. "How's Sam?" he asks, locking eyes with Ponk, and Ponk goes silent. Theseus doesn't know who Sam is, but whenever Dream brings him up, Ponk usually stops talking. Stops asking questions.

Ponk sticks one of the bigger needles into Theseus's wrist and gives him a tired look. "Don't do that, man. You're not like him," he says, and there's a relieved sort of thrum from that weird feeling at the back of Theseus's mind. Ponk undoes the cuff briefly to stick the other needle in his other wrist. "If you knew what you were saying, you wouldn't be saying it."

"Then what *am* I saying, Ponk?" Theseus asks, tired with a twinge of irritation.

Ponk just pats his arm with an infuriatingly gentle hand and smiles sadly. "You don't need to worry about it," he says, which is the world's most annoying thing to hear. The two of them sit in silence for a bit before Ponk removes the needles and gently redoes the cuff. He crosses his arms and leans back in his chair, and Theseus just lets his eyes slide back up towards the ceiling. "I'm gonna keep asking you until you answer. So-have you eaten?"

"Yes," Theseus grits out, "I have."

"And are you still hungry?" Ponk asks, and Theseus just sighs. Of *course* he's hungry, but he doesn't want to eat. Eating takes too much energy. It gives him too much energy. Theseus just wants to stop thinking about everything. Ponk nudges him. "C'mon, kid, I'm trying to help you out here. You hungry?"

Theseus closes his eyes. There's an alarmed sort of shout from Ponk, and he opens his eyes again, startled. "What? What's wrong?" he asks, and Ponk just stares at him, *through* him, it feels like. Theseus shifts uncomfortably. "Have I got something on my face?"

"No, there's, uh... there's nothing on your face," Ponk says, and he sort of looks around, like he's not really sure what to do. Theseus tilts his head back up at the ceiling and sighs. Ponk seems

surprised. "Oh. Um... right, well, I-I think you should... you need to eat something else."

"I'm not hungry," Theseus mumbles.

He says the same thing three more days later—at least, he *thinks* it's been three days—to Dream, who gives him a deadpan stare. Theseus doesn't think this should come as a surprise at all, considering he's been saying it every time Dream's tried to get him to eat. He doesn't *want* to eat, doesn't want the nutrition that comes with it. If he's too tired or too weak, Dream doesn't send him to get treatments. And while Theseus *does* want to get better, he's a bit scared.

Dream huffs in annoyance and shoves his head down towards the tray. Theseus flinches, but he just sits back up and stares pointedly at the wall. "For the love of-Theseus, come *on*, just fucking *eat*," Dream says, impatient as always.

Theseus looks down at the tray. It's another stew this time. It's less watered down. The scent of the beef is making his mouth water. Theseus swallows and keeps his gaze on the wall. "When can I go outside?" he asks, instead of acknowledging what Dream had said which, he knows, is definitely a mistake.

"Are you kidding me? Are you actually fucking kidding me?" Dream asks, voice deathly quiet, and Theseus's jaw quivers ever-so-slightly. "This little hunger strike of yours isn't gonna fly. You *will* have to eat eventually."

"When can I go outside?" Theseus repeats, trying not to cry as there's the quiet *swish* of metal on metal. Maybe he's having another nightmare. Maybe this is just another nightmare. "I wanna go outside, Dream."

"You're too fragile right now," Dream tells him, and Theseus shuts his eyes as the tip of the switchblade brushes a lock of hair away from his face. The blade hesitates. Theseus shudders and opens his eyes again, and Dream puts the knife away. "I don't want you getting hurt."

"When can I go outside?" Theseus asks yet again, voice breaking.

Dream's eyes narrow. "You need to eat, Theseus."

"When can I go outside?"

Dream grabs his wrist and jams the spoon into his hand. "Eat."

"When can I go outside?"

Dream throws the tray across the room. The bowl shatters. "For *fuck's sake!*" he shouts, and Theseus closes his eyes again, trying not to panic. Dream's hand struggles for him-which is odd, because Theseus is keeping perfectly still-but it anchors in his curls, and Dream forcibly turns his head. "You ungrateful, *selfish-*"

"I want to go outside," Theseus breathes out.

Dream shoves him so hard that Theseus collides with the wall, his hands sprawled out against the padding in a half-hearted attempt to catch himself. "Fine. Fucking starve, for all I care," he says, cold and flat, and Theseus slowly sits back up, shaking like a leaf. Dream makes his way over to the door. "You can call for me when you've come to your senses, or you can lap up the stew on the floor like a dog. Your choice."

The silence that washes over the room is both horrible and relieving.

The next time Dream tries to convince him to eat, Theseus is almost nauseated at the sight of just how much food is on the tray. Steaks, bacon, chicken, rice, pasta, vegetables, fruit, fucking *everything*. Theseus resists the urge to hunch over the tray like a wild animal and stuff as much food in his mouth as possible. It smells *heavenly*, and Theseus suppresses a shudder as the weird feeling at the back of his head returns.

"I'm not hungry," Theseus mumbles, voice hoarse. He's had some water-only when it had seemed like Ponk had been at the verge of tears at the idea of him skipping out on it-but his throat is still scratchy.

Dream smooths down a few of the cowlicks in Theseus's hair, and

his eyes crinkle at the corners. For some reason, this makes the weird feeling at the back of his head even more alarmed. "That's okay, buddy, that's fine. You can take your time," he soothes, and Theseus's hands start to shake. "The food is really good, I promise. It's all your favorites!"

Theseus locks his gaze on the steak. *Fuck*, it looks so goddamned delicious. "When can I go outside?" he asks, and he watches Dream's eye twitch out of the corner of his vision. Theseus feels fucking feral, staring down at the food. It's humiliating.

The hand in his hair just continues to smooth over his curls. It makes Theseus feel even more like a starved dog than he already does. "You have to eat in order to heal, y'know. The sooner you eat, the sooner you can go outside," Dream says.

"That's not an answer," Theseus says quietly. "When can I go outside?"

He stiffens as Dream's hand hesitates. "When are you gonna eat?" Dream shoots back, and Theseus wonders if he could somehow smuggle food into the bathroom, where there's no cameras, and eat it in there. Dream taps the top of his head. "I asked you a question, Theseus."

"And I asked *you* a question," Theseus snaps.

Shit.

Dream takes the tray and leaves without another word.

The next attempt actually catches Theseus off guard.

Puffy looks timid-she always does-as she sits down at his bedside, setting a tray of food on his lap. There's not as much food as the last time, but there's still much more than just the watered-down stew he's grown so used to. "Hey, Theseus," she says, softer than Dream has ever tried to be, and Theseus feels tears sting at the corners of his eyes.

"I'm not hungry," he says.

There's a quiet laugh, and then Puffy hesitantly holds her hand above his arm, looking to him like she's asking if it's okay. He nods, and she gives his arm a gentle pat. She leaves her hand there and smooths her thumb back and forth over his wrist. It's terrifyingly nice, and Theseus can't help but wonder when it's going to be taken away.

"You and I both know that that's a lie," she says easily, not like she's mad at him, not like she's disappointed, but like she just wants him to acknowledge it. Theseus's stomach growls, as if on cue, and Puffy's lips quirk up in a half-smile. "But you gotta eat sometime, kiddo. I know you don't *want* to-I get it, really, I do-but you should."

"I just want to go outside," Theseus tells her, voice cracking. "I don't remember what sunlight is like, Mum."

Puffy tries to hide the way her face crumbles with devastation, but she doesn't do a very good job of it. "I know," she says, "and I'm so, so sorry. You *have* to eat, Theseus. *Please*."

Theseus stares down at the IV stuck into his other arm. It's probably doing most of the work to keep him alive. "You said I liked the rain?" he asks, and her presence has already derailed his well-practiced script twice now.

For some reason, that seems to upset her, just a little. "Yeah," she says wetly, "you did."

"If I eat, will Dream let me go outside?" he asks, because he knows she won't lie to him.

Puffy looks uncertain. "I don't know," she says honestly, and Theseus sighs, ignoring the pangs of hunger that carve their way deeper into his stomach. "You could always try-"

She's cut off as the door slides open. Theseus closes his eyes until he hears the door slide shut again. "You know what?" Dream says, and Puffy's grip on his arm tightens, barely noticeable, but there nonetheless. Theseus tries to keep his expression impassive, and Dream's eyes crinkle at the corners. "If you eat-if you manage to get your strength back up-then I'll take you on a little trip."

Theseus swallows. "Promise?" he asks, feeling a little childish.

Dream nods. "Yeah. I'll give you a tour of where I work. Wouldn't that be cool?"

For the first time in ages, Theseus smiles.

So! Tommy has been bitten by a new spider, the effects of it are a bit more extreme than the other, given that the doctors said something about the lights and the cameras, and people seem to be having a hard time seeing him sometimes. He's kind of recovering a couple of memories, but things are still way too foggy for him to really get a grasp on what any of them are. All he wants to do is go outside, but Dream doesn't seem too keen on letting him, so Tommy tries to bargain with his own life via a hunger strike. Things are *not* good in the facility, folks. Eventually, Dream is forced to offer to take him for a short outing if he regains some of his strength.

And that leaves us here! I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter :D I can only handle so much angst at one time myself, so rest assured, the next chapter is gonna be *much* less sad lol

Also, go check out [this](#) incredible art of ge!Tommy :)

no more surprises

Chapter 67: no more surprises

Kristin compartmentalizes, and someone comes to visit.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Kristin scrubs her hands over her face in exasperation.

“Let me get this straight,” she says, hands folded on the table in front of her as her gaze flickers between Tubbo, Quackity, and Charlie. “Not only... have you three been faking fights, but you two have-you’ve been-you’re villains.”

Tubbo leans forward, hands outstretched placatingly, and Kristin narrows her eyes. Phil is silent, shellshocked, beside her, and Wilbur looks about three seconds away from jumping across the kitchen to strangle Quackity. Techno’s still redoing the defenses by the front door-he’s recruited Foolish’s help now that he’s flown back here-but if Kristin catches so much as a *whiff* of the possibility that he’d known about this, she’s gonna be very tempted to get violent. With who? Well, that’s still up for debate, but she has her sights very much set on Quackity at the moment.

“I can explain,” Tubbo says, and Kristin feels like that’s the millionth time she’s heard that in the past couple of weeks. “See, we wanted to keep Tommy’s legacy intact until we brought him home, s-so me and Quackity and Charlie have been orchestrating fights. Fundy isn’t in on it because-”

“He’s a worthless traitor,” some... thing pipes up, and Kristin jumps, startled, as an odd green creature pops up from behind Charlie’s neck. The thing tilts its head. “Hello! I am Slime.”

"Not now," Charlie whisper-yells, eyes wide.

The room is silent for a moment.

"Okay, putting aside how fucking crazy this is," Phil starts, gesturing vaguely to Charlie and the tiny creature on his shoulder, "what in the holy *hell* were you thinking?!"

Tubbo frowns. "In my defense, we've been careful, and it's not like I'm putting myself in any *legitimate* danger," he says, and Kristin would be making her upset much more known if it weren't for the fact that Tubbo's been through hell and back already. Tubbo looks to Quackity and they exchange a look; Kristin doesn't quite know what it means. "We were thinking that... since Quackity's proved his loyalty, he could help us-"

"Absolutely fucking not," Wilbur snaps, and Kristin glances over at him, brows furrowed. "I'm not about to let this egotistical prick *ruin* the very few plans we've managed to scrap together because he suddenly feels like playing the fucking *hero*."

That's... a fair point, in Kristin's opinion. She doesn't exactly trust Quackity, but the genuine remorse on his face makes her hesitate in voicing that. "Wilbur, I'm not trying to look. I *know* that I've hurt Tommy. Apparently, even more than I realized, considering he and Tubbo knew for... a while..." Quackity trails off, giving Tubbo a sheepish, apologetic wince as Tubbo tries to gesture for him to shut up.

"You fucking *knew*?!" Wilbur balks, and Kristin *really* hopes that this doesn't devolve into a screaming match. Phil, bless him, tries to put a hand on Wilbur's shoulder to calm him down, but it's immediately shaken off. "No, no, *fuck* this, he *knew*-! Tommy knew?! And you as well, I-this is-oh, I'm gonna have a fuckin' *conniption*-"

"Maybe we should all try and calm down," Charlie says, and Kristin doesn't even have to look at Wilbur to know that that's the exact wrong thing for Charlie to have said.

Honestly, if Charlie weren't secretly a supervillain, Kristin would be a little amused.

Wilbur scoffs and gives Charlie a positively murderous look. "Oh, don't you *even* start, you fucking *freak of nature*!"

"Don't call him that, asshole! He's just trying to help!" Quackity snaps back, and Wilbur rounds on him, eye twitching. Kristin just sighs and slumps back in her chair. Phil gives her hand a sympathetic squeeze. Quackity regains his composure surprisingly quickly. "Wil, this isn't about *us*, this is about Tommy!"

"Oh, you mean the kid that you've effectively been beating half to death for the past couple of months? That kid?" Wilbur asks mockingly, and Kristin-while still frustrated that they're arguing-admits that it's more than a little warranted. Quackity winces, and he starts to say something, presumably to defend himself, but Wilbur cuts him off. "You're a selfish piece of *shit*, Quackity, and for all I care, you can take your stupid fucking gauntlet and shove it up your!"

"Okay!" Phil says loudly. "That's enough!"

Wilbur, still fuming, judging by the way his chest heaves with angry breaths, falls silent. Quackity has the decency to do the same. Phil looks to Kristin, and she gives him a small, tired smile. She turns back to the three sitting across from them and narrows her eyes. "I hope you know that it was a very dangerous and reckless thing to do," she says, directing the statement at Tubbo, who nods. Kristin is satisfied with that. She turns her gaze to Quackity and Charlie, and she tries *very* hard to bury the insatiable anger she feels. Judging by their nervous expressions, it's not working. "You two have *one chance* to convince me I shouldn't call the police right now."

"We want to help!" the thing-Slime-on Charlie's shoulder chimes in. "We are all very fond of the little spider."

Quackity clears his throat. "We know that Tommy's being held somewhere, and we want to help you get him home," he says calmly, and Kristin narrows her eyes. Quackity shifts in his seat, hands folded in his lap. "I can offer money, manpower, information!"

"Big Q's got a ton of resources," Tubbo cuts in eagerly, and Kristin gives him a skeptical look. It might be true, but Quackity is still a

literal supervillain. Tubbo looks towards Quackity, then to Wilbur. "He's proven his loyalty! All he wants to do is help us. I'm officially vouching for him."

Kristin sighs. "I don't-how do we even *start* to make sense out of any of this?" she asks to no one in particular, and Phil rubs her shoulder gently.

"This is so fucked," Wilbur mutters, burying his face in his hands. Kristin can't help but agree; there's been so much shit happening that it feels like it's just been one after the other after the other. Wilbur fishes for something in his pocket. "*Shit.* I need a smoke."

Quackity hands him a cigarette. Wilbur eyes it warily. "It's literally just a cigarette," Quackity says tiredly, and Kristin nudges Wilbur.

He takes the cigarette and leaves, already flicking his lighter.

Kristin crosses her arms. She's arguably got a lot more catching up to do with this whole situation than Phil, Techno, and Tubbo, and she doesn't have a lot of time to do it. She's spent the past two weeks compartmentalizing, over and over again, trying to make sense of what's happened to their family.

So Tommy is Spider-Man. Shocking information, but information she could handle. It makes sense. Her son, reckless and headstrong and so very brave, getting superpowers and using them for the greater good. Her son, with the weight of the world on his shoulders, getting into fights with supervillains. Her son, someone she has nothing but pride and fondness and love for, is Spider-Man. *That*, she can tuck away, learn to be okay with it until she gets the downtime to not be okay with it.

Phil and Techno had known. Techno, since this whole thing had practically begun, and Phil, since he'd woken from his coma. This one's a bit more difficult to come to terms with. Tubbo can be excused, she can write it off in her mind as Tommy being unable to keep the secret from his best friend-whatever the actual case may be, she doesn't want to know-but her husband? Her son? They'd kept his secret, presumably per Tommy's request, and while Kristin is very understanding at how difficult that decision must have been,

she's still a little pissed off that no one had bothered to tell her. But she can still tuck it away, leave it in the back of her mind to process it when she has the space and the time, process it when she's not in the midst of a literal crisis, trying to plan a rescue operation.

Quackity, her youngest son's headmaster and her oldest son's boss, is a supervillain. This pill is a bit harder to swallow. The man sitting across from her has electrocuted Tommy and thrown him through walls. Charlie, someone she's only just meeting for the first time today, is a twelve-foot-tall slime monster who has beaten Tommy half to death on several occasions. And now, they supposedly want to help her rescue him.

Kristin honestly doesn't know what the fuck to say.

On one hand, she wants to tell them to get the fuck out of her house, but on the other, they could potentially be an *enormous* help. Quackity seems genuinely remorseful, and even though Tubbo is clearly and understandably stressed out, it doesn't seem to be clouding his judgement. If there were any sort of threat to them, Tubbo wouldn't have chanced it.

Kristin looks to Phil, brows furrowed. Phil is fidgeting with his cane, a newer nervous habit of his that's cropped up quite a lot over these past weeks. Kristin sighs, and he locks eyes with her, clearly a little confused. "I mean, we might as well, right?" she hums. "Can't hurt to have more people on our side. On Tommy's side."

Phil seems to sense just how tired she feels. He's good like that. "You're sure about this?" he asks, and she reaches over to squeeze his hand lightly. Phil nods, and he looks over to Quackity and Charlie, eyes narrowed in an intense fury. "You're on thin ice. I suggest you tread *very* carefully."

Clearly relieved, Quackity nods. "Right, well, first things first, what do you guys have planned out so far? Tubbo told us a little bit of it, but he didn't want to give us the full picture unless you gave the go-ahead," he says, and Kristin's a bit surprised at how down-to-business he's gotten so quickly. Quackity holds a hand out to Charlie, who hands him three phones. He passes them out, one to Kristin, one to Phil, and one to Wilbur, who hesitantly takes it, still

clearly angry. With a nervous smile, Quackity clears his throat. "So I figured I should get us all burner phones, just in case they get past the firewalls that Tubbo's put up."

"They're not going to," Tubbo says, and Kristin believes him, "but it's nice to have a just-in-case option. Our plan so far"-he turns to Quackity-"is to figure out where Tommy and Puffy are being held, first and foremost. I'll hack into the systems, figure out whatever access codes and security protocols we need, and Techno, Kristin, and I will go in. We'll have Phil give us direction from here, and Foolish will make sure the defenses here are water-tight."

"What about me?" Wilbur asks, brows furrowed. "You still haven't explained why I'm not meant to be doing anything."

"You're a liability," Tubbo says, all brutal honesty and focus, and Kristin winces sympathetically at Wilbur as he reels back in surprise. Tubbo seems to do a double-take at his own bluntness, and he hurries to correct himself. "It's nothing against you, Wil, you're just Techno's got combat experience, I've got my tech, and Kristin can get us in without being too conspicuous. In terms of strength, Foolish has you beat, so he's in charge of keeping the house safe."

Wilbur's shoulders hunch a little. Kristin knows the expression on his face, knows that he's trying to stay guarded and calm, trying not to lash out. "So give me tech, let me be useful," he says, and Phil puts a hand on his arm.

Kristin can't meet Wilbur's eye. Phil can, though, and Kristin watches his brow furrow, watches as her husband tries not to cry. "I don't want to lose another son, Wil," he says quietly, and Kristin finds herself glancing at Quackity, who has an unreadable sort of expression on his face. She doesn't want to think about much else.

Though he seems unsatisfied, Wilbur says nothing more, and Quackity leans forward. "I think," he starts, slow and clearly trying to be sensitive, which Kristin appreciates, "that we could easily work with that idea. I also think that it would look incredibly suspicious if any of us were seen together, but Charlie and I could easily create a distraction-get a meeting or something-and make sure the way's clear for you."

Charlie nods enthusiastically, as does Slime, who's perched sort of hesitantly on his shoulder, like it doesn't want to intrude. Idly, Kristin thinks that this is absurd, but a lot of things in her life lately have felt absurd, so she brushes past it. "Right, so, do you have any idea where Tommy's being held?" she asks, trying to push past the nagging despair at the back of her mind, the doubt and the paranoia that *they don't have any more information than we do, this is pointless, Tommy's going through God knows what right now and there's nothing we can do about it.*

The doorbell rings before Quackity can answer, and everyone immediately starts to file out, grabbing carefully stashed weapons on their way, save for Quackity-he summons his gauntlet, and Kristin shudders-and Charlie-Slime wraps its symbiote matter halfway over his skin, almost like a shell. Techno and Foolish are already by the door, backs to the frame of it and swords at the ready.

Kristin flexes her fingers around the scimitar in her hand and gives Phil a nod as he unsheathes the sword hidden in his cane. "Who is it?" Techno calls, jaw set, and Kristin takes a deep breath as she readies the scimitar in front of her.

This is fucking insane.

"Uh, it's Sapnap," the voice on the other side of the door chimes, sounding unsure. "Quackity told me to come here...?"

Kristin feels her stomach drop. Looking over to Quackity with wide eyes, she runs through the possibilities as fast as possible. One, it could just be that Quackity wants the support of one of his partners-Wilbur loves to claim he hates gossip, but faculty relations are always a hot topic at Sunday brunches-or two, it could be... so much worse.

Before anyone else can react, Kristin, feeling a bit out-of-body, wrenches the door open and meets Sapnap's eye, and she tries very hard not to run him through with the sword in her hand, tries to give him the benefit of the doubt. Because, she realizes as she flicks her gaze between each of his dark eyes with her own, if he really is a villain-just like Quackity and Charlie, just like so many people she'd trusted, Wilbur had trusted, *Tommy* had trusted-then she

doesn't know what the fuck to do with that.

"No," Phil whispers behind her, "you can't... you're not serious."

Sapnap winces, minutely, barely noticeable, but it tells Kristin everything she needs to know, and she puts her free hand over her mouth, stifling a wounded noise at the back of her throat as she steps aside to let him in. He lingers in the doorway, clearly unsure of himself, unsure of where he fits in the room of people mourning a kid that's not even dead, of people hellbent on revenge, of people trying to grapple with revelations that just keep coming, regardless of whether they've recovered from the last.

"Sorry, I-I couldn't-it was really hard to get away untraced until just now, Dream's really cracking down on security, he's got Schlatt's administration monitoring cell towers and shit for him," Sapnap says, and Kristin just numbly walks over to the kitchen.

Everyone follows her in, mistakenly thinking that she's trying to take charge when, in fact, she wants to do the opposite. She would love to have a moment to herself, a moment where Wilbur and Phil and Techno don't look to her for guidance; she doesn't even remember when that had started, and she doesn't really understand it. Logically, it should be Phil or Techno-both had known about Tommy's identity, both have had much more preparation for any incoming news. But somehow, the onus has fallen on Kristin's shoulders.

She's not about to pass it off to someone else, either, no matter how desperately she would like to. In all fairness, it feels like she's definitely at the center of this. It's her company that had headed that stupid Guided Evolution project, it's-apparently-her coworkers who have been beating her son to a bloody pulp, and it's her who had shaken them all out of their grief-driven stupor, her who had started the charge for a plan, for something to *do* about this.

Phil's hand finds its way to her waist, his other hand gently on her upper arm. He's held her like this before, had held her like this when he'd made her tea after Techno and Tubbo had come home with Henry in their arms and an apology on their tongues. Kristin finds herself leaning into the touch, not caring at how vulnerable she must

look to the traitors across from them in the kitchen. She doesn't even cry-she feels too hollow to do that-and she looks up at Sapnap darkly, gesturing to the seat across from her.

Tubbo has his hand at his hip, where Shroud is perched, metal legs latched to his jeans, as if he's readying himself for an attack. Wilbur has the kitchen knives within arms' reach, eyes locked with Techno's, and Kristin finds herself with a small smile on her face, marvelling at the fact that even after everything, they've still got that almost-psycho brotherly connection.

"We let you in our home," is what she says first, "welcomed you with open arms, even. I *trusted* you. I *respected* you."

There's a kind of fear on Sapnap's face, and Kristin can't really bring herself to care. Not when that fear must have been on Tommy's face a million times over, not when she can picture fight after fight where bombs had been lobbed at Spider-Man's scrawny frame, not when her mind vividly replays news clips of drones firing at her son.

"Where's Tommy being held?" Techno asks, not so much a question as a silent threat, and Kristin gives him a thankful nod.

She can get emotional later, can let herself break down in Phil's arms as she cries into his shoulder in the privacy of their bedroom, but she needs to focus on Tommy. They need to have a concrete plan for rescuing him. Kristin locks eyes with Sapnap again and keeps him there, traps him with her gaze, forces him to speak directly to the mother of the child he'd put through hell.

"I'm not-I haven't been *in* the facility, but it's, uh..." he trails off, and he snaps his eyes to Phil briefly before looking back at Kristin. She sees it there-the fear, the sorrow, the silent apology-and pushes down the nausea that threatens to bubble to the surface. Phil's grip on her tightens a miniscule amount, then slackens, and she laces her fingers with the hand on her waist, silently pleading with him not to break down until they know for sure. Sapnap half-clears his throat. It sounds painfully awkward. "I... George and I didn't-we had no idea he was going to use the underground facilities for this, Phil, I'm-I really-I'm sorry."

Out of the corner of her eye, Kristin watches Wilbur and Techno rush to Phil's side. She can see Tubbo looking at her-can see *Quackity* looking at her. Both of them are trying, very obviously so, to gauge her reaction, but she just remains stoic as Phil slips away, accompanied by Wilbur and Techno, near-incoherent mumbles leaving his lips.

"Tubbo," Kristin says, and Tubbo seems shocked that she's addressing him, "I want you to go and make sure they bring back the blueprints for the facility with them when they come back."

"Yeah, of course," Tubbo says, though he seems a little hesitant to leave her with the three villains-ex-villains? Kristin doesn't know anymore-in the kitchen. She just keeps looking at Sapnap, and Tubbo slips out of the room.

Leaning forward a bit, elbows now on the table as she lays the scimitar on her lap and folds her hands in front of her, Kristin takes a deep breath. "I will admit, I'm very tempted to jump across the table and make you feel every *ounce* of pain you've put my kid through," she tells him, and she relishes in the way it makes him pale immediately. "Fortunately for you-and I'm not saying this lightly-you might be useful for us. So I'm going to give you until everyone else gets back to explain why I shouldn't be planning to clean your blood off of my kitchen floor sometime in the next ten minutes."

Sapnap gets even paler. "Uh, right, so-yeah, I-I can-I know some of the access codes, and while I definitely don't have any doubts about Tubbo's ability to get through our security, Dream's found a workaround for it. It's set up so that even if someone breaks past every firewall, every block, every trap-they'll set off a chain of failsafe alerts, and they'll move the subject-uh, they'll move Tommy to a secondary location that only Dream knows the location of, as of right now, at least," he explains in a nervous flurry of words, and Kristin feels a little more hope inside of her shatter. Sapnap clears his throat. "But I can get you in far enough that you could brute force it without setting off alarms. The doors in the innermost part of the facility are all glass, save for the, um, holding cells, and they don't have sensors if you break them."

"So we'll have to be a little stealthier than we thought, but it should

be fine. With Sapnap's help, we could definitely get Dream and George away long enough to give you guys an opening to break into the facility," Quackity chimes in. "Of course, you'll have to be disguised, we're pretty sure that everyone's got strict orders not to let any of the Watsons into the building, let alone the lower levels of the facility."

Kristin nods, but before anyone can say anything else, Phil and the rest of them filter back into the room, and Phil slumps into the chair next to Kristin. He moves his head up only enough to look at Sapnap. "So you're telling me," he starts, low and dangerous, and Kristin feels something ugly and vindictive rear its head in a sort of 'misery-loves-company' sort of way, "that you had me design a prison specifically tailored to my son?"

Sapnap's shoulders fall, and Kristin glances over at Tubbo, who dutifully lays out the blueprints of the facility on the table and sets Shroud down on top of it. The little drone flickers a holographic image of sorts above itself-it's insanely impressive, Kristin will have to ask Tubbo how the hell he'd managed to do that later-and displays a list of security protocols that scroll inhumanly fast as it darts around.

Tubbo frowns deeply. "There are more than I thought there'd be, and there are failsafes upon failsafes, backups and shit. I could try a workaround, but it'd be incredibly difficult to traverse the code without setting off any of the alert protocols or leaving some kind of trail for them to follow-it'd be frankly impressive if it weren't also objectively horrifying," he mutters, seemingly to no one but himself, and he suddenly snaps his head up to look at Quackity. "I'm gonna need resources. If we have to brute force it, we're gonna need just as many backup plans as he's got. I need to upgrade my tech so I have any hope of competing with his. Is he holding Puffy there, too?"

He'd directed that last question at Sapnap, who blinks in surprise. "Uh, yeah, I-I think so," he says once he's gathered himself again, and Tubbo nods.

Kristin reaches out to give his hand a light squeeze; things have been so hard on him, and he's remarkably put-together. Then again, she understands exactly why he's so focused, exactly why he's not

letting himself linger on anything but attempts to make progress. It might not be healthy, but Kristin doesn't really want to tell Tubbo that he needs to take a break from the one thing that's holding him together. There's no parenting book on what to do when you've had to take your son's best friend and his cousin in because their aunt-slash-mother has been kidnapped, along with your son. There's no precedent for this situation.

She has no doubt of who Dream really is. She's fairly certain Phil and Foolish know, too. She sees it in the way Phil keeps looking over at Foolish, sees it in the way Foolish absentmindedly rubs a hand over his chest, where Kristin knows there's a deep, rugged scar. There's no recognition from Wilbur, Techno, or Tubbo, though, which is good. They don't need even more to worry about. But it's just another cherry on top of the shit sundae, isn't it? Yet another horrific reveal that someone in her life isn't who she'd thought they were.

Later, Kristin will cry about it. Later, she'll fall into Phil's arms and sob about how they'd let this monster into their home, let him talk to Tommy, let him carve a space in their lives that he'd been meant to have left years ago. Later, Kristin will let the guilt and regret claw its way into the cavity of her chest, let grief and righteous fury curl in her gut.

Right now, though, she just needs to get down to business.

Kristin looks to Charlie. "How fast can you get to us if something goes wrong?" she asks, and Charlie blinks in sync with Slime. Kristin's patience is waning, but Charlie seems kind and eager to help, even if she's got a bone to pick with the murderous symbiote on his shoulder. "If we need a distraction-if whatever diversion you guys create doesn't give us a big enough window of time-what's better than a big green monster?"

Charlie nods, earnest. "I'm on it," he says, and Slime nods its head.

"If things go haywire, I want to have tech prepared for the three of us going into the facility. It'll have to be on their level or better, I'm gonna need funds," Tubbo says, looking to Quackity.

“Done,” Quackity says easily, “anything you need.”

Tubbo gives him a sharp nod, the two of them exchanging a look that Kristin can’t even begin to unpack. Tubbo then turns to Techno, nodding down at the broadsword still clasped in Techno’s hand.

“How many of those could you sharpen to a lethal level by the time we get our shit together?” he asks, and Techno raises a brow.

Tubbo’s face breaks out into a wide, mischievous grin. “D’you think you could do, say... ten of them?”

Techno blinks. “Are you implying what I think you’re implying?” he asks, sounding a little intrigued, which is more emotion than Kristin has heard from him in a while.

Wilbur chimes in from his perch on the kitchen counter. “Uh, what are we missing here? How is Techno gonna hold ten swords at once?” he asks, and Tubbo holds up both hands and wiggles his fingers. Wilbur squints. “You’ve lost me.”

“If we’re stealing tech anyway,” Tubbo says, “we might as well throw the bastard’s abilities back in his face.”

Sapnap’s eyes widen. “Oh, holy shit,” he says. “Yeah, no, that’d-Dream’s convinced he’s the only person smart enough to figure out his own coding, you could definitely-I’ll get you the schematics for the finger caps, if you’d like.”

“I could probably do it from scratch, but that’d be a big time saver,” Tubbo tells him, and Sapnap nods. Tubbo turns back to Kristin, seemingly hesitant. “Okay, so, I know you’re not gonna like it, but-”

“Where is this going?” Kristin asks, uneasy.

“I’m pretty sure 404-or, uh, George, I guess-has a new spore formula, and I’m gonna need a sample of it if we wanna have any hope of not passing out immediately if we get caught,” he says, and Kristin *really* doesn’t like where this is going. Tubbo puts his hands up placatingly. “And I’m pretty sure Sapnap doesn’t have access to it”-at that, Sapnap shakes his head, and Kristin feels her unease intensify-“so I’ll probably have to fight him to get one. I’ll hold my breath and get out of there right away, I swear! I’ll be super careful,

and worst case, I'll just activate Shroud's babysitting protocol."

"Babysitting protocol?" Wilbur asks, and Kristin wants to tell him that that's the least of her worries, but Tubbo nods enthusiastically and starts to explain before she can.

"Yeah, I programmed Shroud to drive off any bad guys in case Tommy passed out in the middle of a fight. Shroud couldn't pick him up-his muscle mass was too heavy with all the enhanced bullshit-so it usually just dragged him off 'til he was hidden properly," Tubbo says, half-stifled laughter lacing his voice. "I'd have Shroud stand over him like a little guard dog until we could get to him undetected."

Slime laughs uproariously. "Ah, very good! The little spider's friend is quite smart," it commends, and Tubbo looks unsure and proud of himself at the same time. Slime leans forward towards Kristin, and she leans back, a bit startled. "Mother of the spider, you are the leader, yes? How will we be punishing Automata for his crimes?"

Kristin supposes she technically *is* in charge-well, Tubbo's definitely being more proactive at the moment, but he still defers to her, still talks to her like he's looking for someone to be a guy in the chair for. Kristin wonders if this is what it had been like for Tommy, wonders if he'd felt this overwhelming feeling of responsibility, felt the shock of having everyone suddenly turn to him as though he's in charge. She wonders if he'd felt just as helpless.

She sets her jaw as she meets the symbiote's... eyes? Are they eyes? She can't tell. "I need to keep Dream off our trail, so I'm going to have to go back to work. We'll have to play the part of a family with a missing son that doesn't know anything about how he disappeared," she says firmly. She finds herself smiling at Slime. "And as much as I'd like to kill the bastard, I think he deserves worse. If you want to be part of that, you're more than welcome to it. But for every second that Tommy's in there with that *monster*, we repay it tenfold. Is that understood?"

"I like you," Slime declares. "Your murderous intent is admirable."

Phil gives Kristin's shoulder a squeeze. "We've got a plan," he says, "so let's get our fucking kid back."

Kristin is thumbing through expense reports when Sapnap bursts into her office, eyes wide and face pale.

"Well, good morning to you, too," she says, slightly amused, and Sapnap gestures for her to hush, running a hand through his hair. Kristin gives him a confused look, and he winces. She crosses her arms, leaning back in her chair. "Okay, what's going on?"

"You can't go out there," he says, and she realizes now that he's practically shielding the door with his body, arms spread-eagled out across the doorframe. At her confused expression, Sapnap shakes his head. "You really-I am-holy *shit*, Kristin."

Kristin gestures to the chair across from her, but Sapnap just shakes his head. "You look like you've just seen a ghost," she jokes, and Sapnap makes an expression that is frankly indescribable. Kristin feels something in the pit of her stomach, a steady pulse of dread, and she quickly wipes her amusement from her face. "What's out there? Is it-is Dream here?"

Sapnap's eye twitches, and he runs his hand through his hair again. "Uh, yeah, he's-but that's not what I'm-holy *shit*," he says again, and Kristin stands from her desk. Sapnap's efforts to guard the door double, and he keeps one hand over the knob. "I'm serious, you *really* shouldn't go out there."

There's no reason for him to be as adamant as he is if it were just Dream. Kristin's feigning ignorance about practically everything Dream's been doing under the company name, she's heard condolences and well-wishes from her co-workers, still not knowing who's partially responsible for kidnapping her kid, and she's done it all without losing composure once. If it were just Dream, Sapnap wouldn't be this paranoid.

If it were just Dream, Sapnap wouldn't look so horrified.

"Sapnap," Kristin starts slowly, "did Dream bring anyone with him?"

The look on Sapnap's face betrays the shake of his head. When

Kristin gives him a glare, he hangs his head in resignation and allows her to lead him over to the chair across her desk. She'll take his word on the situation for now and stay in her office-she doesn't entirely want to see anything without knowing exactly what to prepare herself for.

He looks more guilt-ridden than Kristin's ever seen him, and that's saying something, considering he'd spent the rest of his time at the house apologizing over and over again, swearing that he'd make things right. There's a bit of anger there too, the righteous kind, which is an emotion that Kristin is certainly familiar with.

Sapnap's leg bounces anxiously. Kristin tries not to think about the fact that it reminds her of Tommy. "I knew he was arrogant, but I didn't think-he must be so *sure* of himself, he's-I'm gonna kill him," Sapnap says darkly, and Kristin raises a brow at him. Sapnap shakes his head, clearly infuriated. "It's like he thinks no one's gonna fucking-like nobody can *stop* him, he's so-and Tommy looks so-! Oh. Shit."

Oh shit is right.

Kristin feels her face drain of its color, and she swallows around the lump that's formed in her throat. "Tommy's out there?" she asks, voice trembling in spite of her best efforts to keep it steady, and Sapnap makes a wounded sort of noise.

He seems to be going back and forth between horrified, angry, and devastated, and Kristin would like to be more sympathetic than she feels, really, she would. But she can't really bring herself to care about the clear breakdown that Sapnap is having over Dream's utter audacity, not when her son is just on the other side of the door.

"He's-Kristin, you can't go out there, I'm telling you," he says, a little shaky as he slumps back in the chair. Something seems to be eating away at him, and he gnaws nervously at his bottom lip, pointedly avoiding her eye. "It's bad. It's really, *really* bad. Oh, *fuck*, this is bad."

"What's bad? How is he? Does he-is he okay?" she asks, already knowing the answer, and Sapnap just shakes his head again,

muttering something about how he *can't believe Dream is like this, he was never like this, it was never this bad*. Kristin sighs. "Look, I appreciate that you're having a crisis over the fact that your best friend is a bad person-"

"No, no, I-I knew... some of it, already, I..." he trails off, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Dream's always been a little... off. It was fun for us, at first-for me and him and George, I mean. His arrogance wasn't, like, a *bad* thing, he was-I mean, he's usually justified in it, he always follows through on what he says, but *Christ*, I didn't think it'd turn out like this."

"Sapnap, I need you to tell me what's wrong with Tommy," Kristin says, as calmly as she possibly can, and Sapnap gives her a pained look. "How does he look? Is he...?"

She trails off, not entirely certain of what she'd even been trying to ask, and Sapnap runs a hand through his hair again. "Fuck, this is so bad, I-Kristin, you really can't go out there," he says, and Kristin gestures for him to go on. "He's-it's so *bad*, fuck, I can't-I knew Dream was bad, but holy *shit*, I think he's-it's that stupid *device*!"

"What device?" Kristin asks, and Sapnap's expression is akin to that of a child caught with their hand in the cookie jar, like he hadn't meant to say that. Kristin feels the dread in the pit of her stomach grow. "What's the device for, Sapnap?"

Sapnap wraps his arms around himself. "I only ever saw him use it once, I... you wouldn't know it-hell, I don't even think *Charlie* knows it-but there was a, um... a problem with-with the pre-conditioning for the symbiote," he says, and Kristin really doesn't have the headspace to really process this, but she'll deal with it later. "And Dream used the device to, um... see, Charlie-he died. Medically speaking. But Dream-the device-it brought him back. It's why his memory is... the way it is."

"What are you trying to say?" Kristin asks, voice coming out in a half-whisper, and Sapnap gives her a pleading look. She has no sympathy, not when he could be implying something she doesn't think she can even process right now. "Spit it out."

"Charlie's got a streak of white hair at the very back of his head," Sapnap says in lieu of an answer. "I don't think he even knows. The rest of his hair is long enough to cover it, s-so you wouldn't-nobody but me, Dream, and George would have seen-"

"Jesus fucking Christ, stop beating around the bush!" Kristin snaps, and she calms herself quickly, taking a few deep breaths. It does her no good to get snippy, not when she needs to keep a level head. She can't let Dream see her falter. She folds her hands on her desk in front of her and gives Sapnap a grim look. "I need you to tell me what this has to do with Tommy."

Sapnap looks... utterly terrified. "A bunch of his hair is white," he says, barely more than a whisper. "I don't-I didn't think-this is so *fucked*, I'm sorry, I-he's been-Dream must be killing him a-and reviving him, over and over, I don't know why he would, but he *is*, he has to be, there's no other..."

He trails off, and Kristin hears nothing but ringing in her ears. He's clearly saying *something*, probably an apology or explanation, but Kristin can't register it over the roar of blood rushing against her eardrums. Tommy is being killed, over and over again, and Dream has brought him here to-what, taunt her?

She's going to kill Dream.

No, scratch that, she's going to make him *wish* he were dead.

She cuts off whatever Sapnap is saying abruptly. "Are there still weapons on the fifty-first floor?" she asks, and Sapnap's brows furrow. "Is all of Quackity's equipment still being safeguarded there?"

"Look, I want him dead just as much as you do, but we can't-there's no way to do it right now without endangering Tommy," he says, and she wants nothing more than to throw something, to go out there and throttle Dream, but she knows he's right. For all they know, Dream is the only one with access to the device, and if he kills Tommy before they get to him, there's no guarantee that they can bring him back. Sapnap clears his throat. "This is fucked. There's no other way around it. This is really fucked up."

Before Kristin can respond, there's a knock on her office door, and she grabs the expense reports she'd been shuffling through as it starts to open. "Here you go, sorry that took so long to get in order," she says, feeling white-hot fury flood her veins as she spots Dream in her peripheral vision. But she can't give it away, not yet. Sapnap takes the papers with a slightly shaky hand, and she gives him an encouraging smile, trying to silently get him to play it cool. Kristin turns to Dream and feigns surprise. "Oh, hey, Dream, what's up?"

His eyes crinkle at the corners. She wants to kill him. "I'm just stopping by, seeing what everyone's up to," he says, and Kristin can see Sapnap sweating bullets in the corner of her eye. Dream nods towards the papers. "Thank you for taking care of those. I know things have been hard for you and your family lately. It means a lot that you're still here and working. Sapnap, why don't you go take care of those?"

Sapnap, clearly relieved to be given an out, nods, and he gives Kristin a weary, tense smile before he ducks out of the office. That just leaves the two of them, and Kristin refuses to give anything away. If Dream wants to play this stupid fucking game of his, she's going to win it.

"Things have been pretty hard, yeah," she says, "but I gotta pay the bills somehow, right? I appreciate the time off, though."

Dream is cool as a goddamn cucumber. She wants to smack that smug look off of his face-or what little is left of it, based on what Tubbo's told her about the first trial for the Guided Evolution project. "Of course, don't mention it," he says. "I know what it's like to miss your family terribly. You have my utmost sympathy."

Oh, how she longs to shoot Dream square in the face.

She doesn't voice this, obviously, because it would blow her cover, and that's the last thing any of them need right now. "Thank you," she says softly, feigning the role of grieving mother-though she doesn't have to do much work to fake it, not when Tommy is just on the other side of the door, not when she's *right there* and can't do anything. "That means a lot."

Dream nods, then perks up a bit, clearly faking surprise. "Oh, I totally forgot! George," he calls out towards the hall, "would you mind bringing my little brother in here? I don't think Kristin's gotten the chance to meet him yet."

Kristin forces herself to give him a seemingly confused smile. Sadistic bastard that he is, of *course* he's going to bring Tommy in here. "I don't think I have, actually," she says, forcing her tone to be as pleasant as possible. "What's his name?"

Holding up a finger, Dream faces the door, and Kristin tries not to show the absolute devastation she feels as he leads Tommy-her kid, her brave kid, her *wonderful* kid-into the room. "Kristin, meet Theseus," he says, voice brimming with a sick kind of pride, and Kristin feels her breath catch in her throat as she turns her eyes to Tommy.

He looks so *frail*.

There's a pair of medical sunglasses on his face-the kind that blocks out almost everything-and he doesn't quite look at her, doesn't quite look at anything. Dream's taken away his sight. An entire fucking sense, gone, just like *that*. She doesn't even know if it's permanent, and that's terrifying. He's so skinny, almost gaunt, and his clothes hang loosely from his frame, making him look more like an impression of a person than an actual human being.

Tommy's curled in on himself, like he's trying to take up as little space as humanly possible, and it's one of the many things about him that feel unrecognizable. Tommy is loud, he's bright, he takes up space and is unafraid to do so. This isn't Tommy. It *can't* be Tommy. But it is, and Kristin knows that, and she *hates* it.

Dream's eyes crinkle at the corners again. "He's very sick, you see, so he doesn't really get out much. But he's been doing good, so I wanted to take him out on a little field trip as a treat," he says, and Kristin's hands twitch at her sides. Dream nudges Tommy's shoulder. "Go on, be polite and say hello."

Tommy's face twitches in what Kristin *knows* is a grimace, but it's clearly an honest attempt at a smile, and she's never seen that look

on his face before. "Hello," he says, too softly, too quietly, too anxious, and Kristin is half-tempted to grab a pen from her desk and shove it through Dream's eye. But Tommy's here, right in front of her, just out of reach. "It's lovely to meet you."

He's just unrecognizable enough that Dream is expecting her to not know who he is. His hair is just long enough, face just gaunt enough, frame just thin enough, skin just scarred enough to make him look like a different-if similar-person. Dream is doing this just for the thrill of it, just for the challenge, maybe, just to revel in the fact he's dangling Tommy within arm's reach of safety while knowing there's no real threat to whatever he has planned.

Kristin forces herself to smile. "It's lovely to meet you, too," she says. *I miss you terribly*, she wants to say. *We're coming to save you. We love you. I'm sorry.* "How's the tour going? Do you like it here?"

Tommy perks up at that, clearly excited to have been asked for his input, and Kristin feels her heart break a little further. "Yeah! I-It's really cool to see-or, uh, not *see*, but experience, I guess-where Dream works," he says, and Kristin nods. "I really like-

"We should get going soon, though. Today really got away from us, we gotta get you back so you can get your vitals checked," Dream says, sounding for all the world like a genuinely concerned older brother, but Kristin feels nothing but vitriol. Dream carefully leads Tommy back towards the door, and he turns to look at Kristin over his shoulder. "Thanks for letting us check out your office. Theseus doesn't get these kinds of opportunities often."

With that, he shuts the door behind him, and Kristin slumps down into the chair closest to her, staring at the door.

Tommy had been *right there*.

Hey! It's been a while, lol. Sorry I took an impromptu sort of break, things were crazy with my exams and stuff. Hope you enjoyed this

chapter, it was definitely a departure from the last chapter being angst central!

Go check out this incredible art:

[This](#) absolutely lovely birthday art !! :D

[This](#) absolutely breathtaking art of ge!Sally omgggg

End of chapter summary:

Tubbo brings Quackity and Charlie to the house, and the ex-villains offer their help. Kristin grapples with the flood of new information that's been presented to her over the past couple of weeks. Sapnap explains that Tommy and Puffy are being held in the facility that Phil designed. Kristin returns to work to keep their cover, and Dream brings Tommy to her office.

hidden in the smoke

Chapter 68: hidden in the smoke

Dream takes Theseus back to the facility.

Holy shit? Thank you for 4500 kudos???? That's bonkers :D

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Theseus is a bit bummed to be going back so soon, but he supposes it can't be helped.

Nevertheless, he's excited about all the new sensations he's getting to experience by just being outside. The warmth of the sun is his favorite at the moment. He hasn't gotten to feel it much-just for a brief moment when Dream led him into the building-but it's absolutely wonderful. It's better than he could've ever imagined. The sounds of outside and indoors are both so overwhelming after weeks and weeks of near-silence, save for when he mumbles things to himself or screams or talks to Puffy. They're overwhelming in a good way, though, the way that the taste of the food he's had lately is. It feels almost too good to be true.

The building is full of people-full of *life*, really-and Theseus can't help but smile. It's so pleasant here, and even though he doesn't want to get in the way or bother anyone, he finds himself waving in the direction of the voices that say hi to him. Sure, he might not be able to see much, given that the glasses Dream's made him wear only really leave him with the vague shape of objects, but everything else

makes up for it tenfold.

He's actually gotten to talk to people, to introduce himself. It's odd, in a way; his name fits weirdly in his mouth when he tells everyone that it's his.

Alas, all good things must come to an end, and Dream is guiding him back through the ground floor. Theseus had heard the elevator chime, a cool, robotic voice saying *Ground floor: lobby*, and he'd grinned like an idiot. "'Lobby,'" he parrots back at Dream in a goofy voice, trying to wheedle a laugh out of his older brother, "'lahb-bee,' she says it so weird."

"Theseus," Dream says, and a weird feeling pricks at the back of his head.

Theseus is too giddy to really process it, though, too happy to be out and about to listen. "'Lobby, ground floor,'" he chirps again, delighted to have something to joke about, and Dream's grip on his shoulder tightens minutely. "It's fun, Dream, try it—"

"Theseus, you're making a scene," Dream grits out, and Theseus's grin falls.

He doesn't want to embarrass Dream or distract anyone from their work. He'd just been trying to make Dream laugh. There's another pull at the back of his head, as if warning him not to voice that thought, not to try and defend himself, to play along. *For your safety*, something scared and worried in the back of his mind says, and he chastises himself mentally. Dream wouldn't make him feel unsafe. *He already has*. No, he can't think like that. Dream's a good person, he's just trying to look out for Theseus, just trying to keep him safe. He's just trying to be a good big brother.

He knows what a good big brother is. The metallic clang of a fencing saber. Hair dye staining a ring of pink around the bottom of the tub. First aid kits. Guitars. Warm mugs of coffee. Tired bags under brown eyes and a serene smile. The smell of-

"Smoke," Theseus says quietly as they step out into the street. "Someone's smoking."

He can smell it, smell the stink of cigarettes, and he hates the smell, but it's familiar. Almost too familiar. Theseus wants to ask. He wants to ask if Dream smokes-if he's stopped smoking, if that's the case-but he knows he shouldn't. Dream doesn't really like it when he asks a lot of questions like that. Dream's told him, over and over again, that remembering too many things at once could mess up his memory permanently, and Theseus doesn't really want to risk it.

Maybe he'll just keep that question to himself.

"Yeah, it's awful," Dream tuts, and he nudges Theseus into a car. "C'mon, let's get you back before it messes with your lungs. Some people are so inconsiderate."

Theseus nods, and he fumbles for the seatbelt, clicking it into place. Dream shuts the car door, and it locks. George is driving, most likely. The air freshener smells like the forest-earthy and leafy-which is often what Theseus gets a whiff of when George comes to get him for treatments in the mornings. Theseus leans back in his seat and waits, but there's no additional door opening yet, and the car hasn't moved.

"Hey, George," Theseus says, and there's a hum from the front seat. George is nice enough. He's Dream's friend, his co-worker, and Dream's told Theseus how loyal George is. That's a good quality for a friend to have-loyalty. "Do you smoke?"

"God, no," George mutters. "Those things'll kill you."

This brings Theseus no comfort.

Who smokes? Had he been friends with someone who'd smoked before? Is that why he doesn't have any friends? Had his friends been bad influences? Had the smoking affected his already fragile health or something? No, no, that doesn't feel right. It hadn't been the smoke itself he remembers being bothered by, but the smell.

Someone is smoking in the living room. A lanky dumbass is hanging out the window to keep it outside, but Theseus feels no annoyance, only worry and a bit of exasperated fondness. Like a brother. It must be Dream, then. Apologetic eyes, guilty smile, two mugs of coffee.

Wait.

A smile?

That can't be right, that means it's not Dream. Dream had said that whoever had been smoking just now was awful, too, that's-it's *definitely* not Dream, then, right? If it's not Dream and not George, maybe a friend? But that can't be right either, it's definitely someone whose presence he's used to seeing every single day, someone that feels so familiar that it makes his head pound in an attempt to quell the sudden sadness that washes over him at not remembering.

Who smokes?

His finger had started to trace the beginning of a W on the cold facility ground.

Theseus grips the seat tightly, but he's careful to keep himself in control. Dream's told him that he doesn't know his own strength. Dream's also told him that he's fragile. Sometimes the things that Dream tells him are contradictory-confusing, even-but Theseus doesn't question it, not to his face. He knows better than that now, knows not to upset his brother like that.

The door opens and closes again after a moment. "Well, how'd you like our little field trip, Theseus?" Dream asks, and Theseus gives him a small smile. It's important not to be *too* happy about something, but not too subdued about it either. That way, Dream won't take it away as a punishment, and Theseus doesn't seem ungrateful for the gift given to him. He jumps a bit as Dream's hand ruffles his hair. "Let's head back."

"I had a really lovely time today," Theseus says quietly-polite and respectful, just as he should be-and Dream hums. "Thank you for taking me outside."

There's another hum. "You're welcome. And props to you for being so well-behaved. Sometimes you've got a bit of an attitude problem, kid," Dream says, teasing but not teasing, just a joke with an underlying jab. Theseus nods. "You know what? Now that your little hunger strike is over with, and you did so well on this outing... what

do you want to do when we get back?"

Something tugs at the back of his mind, and instinctively, Theseus knows *exactly* what he wants to do. "Can I eat with Puffy today? I-I know we usually all eat separately, and I'm sure you've got very, um-really important things to take care of, s-so I wouldn't want to burden you, obviously," he says, and he really shouldn't be rambling. Dream hates it when he rambles. He also hates stilted answers. Balance is really important to Dream. Theseus clears his throat and tries to keep his request as succinct and reasonably justified as possible. "I would just really like to spend a little more time with her. Someone can be in the room with us if you'd like, uh, to make sure she doesn't try to jog my memory too much."

The car is quiet, save for the telltale rumbling of George starting to drive, and Theseus's hair stands on end. He hopes that Dream will say yes. He *really* hopes he'll get to talk to Puffy, that he'll get to ask her about why the smell of cigarette smoke is so familiar. Dream still hasn't said anything, and Theseus tries to keep himself still, no matter how badly he wants to fidget with the hem of his shirt. Dream gets annoyed pretty easily by his nervous habits, and the last thing he wants right now is to annoy Dream.

"I don't see why not," Dream says after a while, and Theseus feels relief wash over him. Another hair ruffle. Theseus smiles as best as he can. Dream's hand falls away again, and his shoulders feel a lot less tense. "You did good today, Theseus."

Theseus both revels in the praise and hates himself for it.

Puffy is waiting in his room when he gets back.

She's in the desk chair, glancing around the room, and Theseus beams when he sees her, even though the light is dim enough that it's hard to *really* see her. "Hey, Mum!" he says, and she gives him a small smile. His brow furrows as she gets closer to greet him. The bags under her eyes are worse than usual. "Are you alright? Are you getting enough sleep?"

As she pinches his cheek lightly, Puffy's smile gets more determined. "Don't worry about me so much, kiddo, I'll be just fine," she says, and though Theseus wants to protest, to tell her that he can't help but worry, he just nods. Puffy glances over to the door, and Theseus shuts his eyes instinctively as it opens, then, after a while, closes again. Puffy's hand rests on his shoulder. "If you want to look now, you can."

That's always so puzzling to Theseus. Puffy makes a point of what *he* wants to do, rather than just telling him what he needs to do. He opens his eyes, though, because he really does want to see her. "I went outside today," he says, quiet and eager, like he's sharing a big secret with her, and Puffy nods. "It was *incredible*, Mum, you should've been there! There were so many *smells* and *feelings* and *noises*! The sunlight was so nice! I only got to feel it for a little bit, but it was so *warm*. Mum, it... it was so *warm*."

The excitement in his voice has tapered off into something more somber, something easily cracked and terrifyingly fragile. There's a lump in his throat, and for some reason, he feels as though he's going to cry. And isn't that just silly? He's so happy about having felt sunlight on his face that he might burst into tears. Such a frivolous thing to be emotional about, isn't it?

"Oh, kiddo," Puffy says, sounding so very sad, and Theseus tries to stop his bottom lip from quivering so much. She smooths his hair down, nudges him towards the bed and lets him sit there for a moment. Puffy combs her fingers through his hair, gathers the locks and ties it back, out of his face. A few strands that are too short for it fall loose around his face, and Theseus keeps his eyes on the floor. "There you go. Is that a little better?"

He nods. His neck feels a little less prickly now. Puffy moves towards the bathroom, and Theseus wraps his arms around himself as he hears the faucet turn on and off again briefly. When she comes back into the room, it's with a damp washcloth in hand, and she gently wipes his face, brows furrowing every so often.

"Something on my face?" he jokes weakly, and Puffy huffs out a sad laugh. Theseus lets his eyes slide shut in contentment as Puffy rubs her hand in small circles over the center of his back. This feels right,

feels familiar. "You've done this before. I remember."

Puffy seems a little hesitant, eyes flicking to the door and back again almost imperceptibly when he looks to her again. "I have," she says, uneasy for some reason, "but not in a while."

Theseus frowns. "No, I-you have," he says, gnawing at his bottom lip as he tries to remember properly. *Hospital. It's a hospital. Mum's there. Is it Mum? No. The hair's too dark to be Puffy's, the eyes not tired enough but weary nonetheless.* "In... in the hospital. Why were we there? It wasn't... I don't-fuck, I can't *remember!*"

He curls in on himself, and Puffy puts a hand on his shoulder. "It's okay. Just give yourself a minute. Don't strain your memory," she murmurs, and it's different when she says it than when Dream says it. She says it when *he's* upset over the fact he can't remember, rather than just when he's trying to. Theseus takes a shuddering breath and scrubs a hand over his face as Puffy tucks one of the stray curls behind his ear. "I'm right here. Food's not going anywhere either. Take your time, take a few deep breaths."

"Thank you," Theseus says after a bit, and Puffy gives him a soft smile. Theseus fidgets with his hands, knows that it's fine if he does- Puffy doesn't mind his little nervous movements, doesn't mind it when his leg bounces or when he bites his nails. "Do you... Mum, d'you smoke?"

Puffy looks confused for a moment, then her eyes widen. She looks like she's just realized something. "Not since my navy days," she says, very carefully and deliberately, and Theseus tries to understand why he remembers the smell of cigarette smoke so vividly if nobody in his life has smoked around him. Puffy tilts her head. "Did it... trigger a memory?"

She brings the tray of food from the side table and looks pointedly down at it. Theseus looks down, too. He scans his eyes over the food-wait, breakfast? Why is it breakfast? They were meant to have dinner together, weren't they?-and he slowly, deliberately takes hold of the mug of coffee. "No," he lies, lifting the mug and inclining it slightly towards her, "it didn't. I was just curious, that's all."

Coffee, coffee with someone, coffee with someone that smells faintly like cigarettes.

Theseus silently thanks whatever deity is listening, because Puffy gets a sort of glint in her eye as she nods. "That's okay. Can't imagine that it would, me and Dream don't smoke," she says, and Theseus catches her meaning, too. He catches the underlying *we don't, but someone does, someone smokes, not us*, and he gives her a small smile. Puffy ruffles his hair. "It's terrible for your health, y'know. Some people smoke when they're stressed."

"I don't smoke often, y'know? I just... it's a stress reliever," someone's saying, a hand running through already ruffled curls. Theseus can't remember their face.

Theseus swallows. "Yeah," he says, and it's almost as if he and Puffy are having an entire conversation without saying much of anything at all. This is completely and utterly terrifying to him. If *this* memory-whoever smokes, whoever he remembers having coffee with, whoever he feels so fondly exasperated towards-is real, if it's got nothing to do with Dream or Puffy, is *anything* real? Theseus gnaws at his bottom lip and darts his gaze between each of Puffy's eyes, silently pleading with the universe that she'll keep getting the silent subtext behind his words, that she'll keep understanding. "I'd be so worried if you smoked."

Judging by the way Puffy's eyes start to swim with hope in addition to the determination, she knows exactly what he means. "Good thing you don't have to worry about us," she says, and she holds her palm out. Theseus hesitantly puts his hand in hers, and her thumb traces the shape of a question mark on the back of his hand.

Fuck.

This really does mean something, doesn't it? This really does mean that something is wrong, something about this is off. Dream isn't telling him something. There's a person-someone *important* in his memories that Dream doesn't want him to see. Theseus wants to trust that it's for his own safety and well-being, but that little voice at the back of his head, that ever-present instinct, is telling him that it's something more sinister.

"Mhm," Theseus hums, taking a sip of the coffee as he traces a W on the back of her hand with his own thumb. Puffy stiffens, but when Theseus looks to her, her eyes are misty. She's not angry with him. Not upset, either. If anything, she looks *proud*. Theseus takes his hand back and looks back down at the tray. Nothing jumps out at him. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course," Puffy says, "anything."

Theseus glances to the door nervously. "Did we... spend a lot of time together?" he asks, and he hopes that Puffy knows he means whoever the W stands for.

She gives him a look-a mixing pot of emotions that he can't quite discern-and nods. "Yeah, kiddo," she says, "tons. Practically attached at the hip."

"Oh," Theseus says, suddenly feeling quite winded.

This person, whoever they are, apparently means an incredible deal to him, and Theseus can't even remember their face. Not to mention the fact that Dream clearly hadn't wanted him to remember said person for whatever reason. Has Dream really been lying to him? Theseus doesn't have any friends, but according to Puffy, he's incredibly close with whoever this person is. But Dream wouldn't have lied to him. Dream's not like that, he's a good big brother, he's taking *care* of Theseus. He's comforted Theseus through all of the treatments, been there whenever he could, whenever his work hadn't gotten in the way.

But if Dream had lied about this, what else could he have lied about? *Had* he lied about this? He wouldn't have, surely not. Dream is nice to him when he deserves to be treated nicely. *No one else would be as lenient with your behavior*, a voice whispers in his mind, one that sounds suspiciously like Dream, and Theseus desperately wishes that his brain would stop contradicting itself. One minute, it's trying to convince him that Dream is the most suspicious man on earth, and the next, it's chastising him for ever doubting his big brother. Theseus doesn't know what to do anymore. It's like he can't win.

"Theseus? You okay?" Puffy asks, and her voice always sounds tense around his name, like she hates the way it sounds. But that doesn't make any sense. She'd given him that name at some point, hadn't she? Why does she always sound like she hates it? Does she hate *him*? Is he just overreacting? Had he been reading this entire interaction wrong? Maybe they weren't having a silent conversation, maybe she hadn't been trying to communicate with him through subtext, maybe she just thinks he's crazy, he's a total nutter, he's losing his mind- "Woah, woah, deep breaths, buddy, deep breaths. I'm right here, I've got you."

Theseus gasps, chest hiccupping and hands shaking. Puffy gently takes the mug from his hand and sets both it and the tray down on the side table again. "S-Sorry, I'm sorry, I don't know-I have no idea what's wrong with me, I-I'm-shit, I'm so sorry," he whimpers, gripping at his head because his skull is fucking *pounding*, and he doesn't want to be here anymore. He's not sure he wants to be anywhere anymore.

Puffy blinks, as if something's caught her off guard, and she hovers a hand in the air between them, like she's not sure where to put it. It's almost like she's looking through him and not at him. "I'm right here," she says uneasily, and Theseus reaches for her hand. She jumps when he grabs it, as if she hadn't been expecting it. "Oh, are-that's you?"

"Of course it's me," Theseus says, his confusion overtaking his panic for a moment. "Who else would it be, Mum? You're looking right at me."

Puffy glances around for a second before she nods. "Right, yeah, obviously," she says, though she doesn't sound entirely certain. Theseus gives her hand a squeeze, and Puffy looks at him this time, shoulders slumped in relief. "You alright?"

Before Theseus can respond, the door's opening again, and he has to close his eyes. Does he? Or is that a lie? Is he really sick? Or is it just the lack of food? Nevertheless, he opens his eyes when he hears the door shut again, and his stomach sinks with dread when he sees Dream and George standing by the doorway.

“George, why don’t you escort Puffy back to her room?” Dream asks, less of a question than a direct order, and Theseus-idiot that he is-lets his face fall.

“Wh-but we haven’t even gotten a chance to eat yet,” he protests weakly. Dream pays him no mind, saying something quietly to George, and Puffy won’t look Theseus in the eye. Theseus stands from the bed and tugs on Dream’s sleeve, feeling a bit childish. “Dream, you said we could-”

“I know what I said,” Dream tells him coldly, and the feeling at the back of Theseus’s head sends a shiver down his spine, “and I’ve changed my mind. Do I ever change my mind without a good reason?”

Yes, Theseus wants to say, *you do it all the time. It’s confusing. It’s scary.*

“No,” he says instead, flinching when Dream wrenches his arm away. He looks to Puffy, and he feels completely defeated. He won’t get to ask more, not for a while. “Have a nice night, Mum.”

Puffy nods and takes his face in her hands. The touch, such a small, motherly affection, almost makes Theseus burst into tears again. “Be good,” she tells him, a warning and a fear and a declaration of faith all in one, and Theseus nods. “Be good for your brother.”

“I will,” Theseus tells her. “I promise.”

George tugs on Puffy’s shoulder, and her hands fall away. Theseus turns and shuts his eyes as Puffy is led out of the room, trying desperately not to flinch again when the door shuts and Dream ruffles his hair. “You guys talk about anything interesting?” he asks, and it should be just an innocent question, just his big brother asking about a conversation he’d had with their mum, that’s all.

But it feels *sinister*, feels *wrong*, and Theseus hates that-now that he’s paying attention to subtext-he can hear the underlying threat in Dream’s tone. “Not really, no,” Theseus lies through his teeth, and Dream’s eyes narrow at him. “I told her about what it was like to be outside. I think... I think my sickness made me freak out like that. I’m

sorry.”

There’s a kind of adrenaline rush that comes with lying to Dream, like he’s just dodged a great deal of danger. Dream tilts his head. Theseus thinks that he’s trying to look sympathetic, but he can’t be certain. “It’s not your fault, but try to keep it in check, yeah?” Dream says absentmindedly, and Theseus nods. It’s easier this way, to just agree with Dream and keep the fleeting feelings of rebellion to himself. Dream jerks a thumb towards the tray. “Not going back on your hunger strike, are you?”

“No, n-no, not-God, no, Dream, I’m-I’ll eat, I just got... distracted, what with the whole...” he trails off, and Dream hums, seemingly satisfied with his answer. Theseus steps towards his desk and runs his finger over the beveled edge of it. “Um... I’m sorry I can’t remember much still.”

Dream just waves his hand dismissively. “That’s alright. Like I’ve told you, it’s perfectly normal for the kind of amnesia you’ve got. Don’t try and remember everything all at once,” he jokes, but Theseus knows it’s not a joke. Dream crosses his arms and stands by the door, gaze darting between Theseus and the tray of food. Theseus goes back over to the bed and starts eating. That seems to be the right choice. “Y’know, your birthday’s coming up.”

“Is it really?” Theseus asks, trying to sound engaged in the conversation without sounding too interested. He doesn’t want Dream to think he’s going to be selfish about it. “That’s nice.”

“Figured you’d be a little more excited than that,” Dream says, and the hand Theseus is holding the mug of coffee with is starting to shake. He gives Dream a half-smile. “I mean, I *could* just leave without asking you what you wanted to do for it-”

“No! No, I’d-I would love to do something for my birthday,” Theseus says, deliberately keeping his tone as even and calm as possible. But it doesn’t feel like his birthday. Even if he’s got no way to keep track of the date, something in his gut tells him his birthday isn’t for a while. “Obviously, I want to do something.”

Dream laughs a little. "There you go, there he is," he commends, and Theseus lets out a shaky laugh of his own. Dream's eyes crinkle at the corners. "So, what were you thinking? You don't really have any friends to invite, and I don't know how comfortable I'd be with letting you go outside again so soon-your health is still really fragile, after all."

Theseus takes a bite of the breakfast sandwich on the tray so that he has a bit of time to think before he answers. He can go over the very few things he knows. One, Dream is lying to him about either his friends... or something bigger. The *W* he remembers is pivotal to that. Two, Puffy knows more than she's letting on. Or, rather, than she's being *allowed* to let on. And three, Theseus has no idea what to do with these potentially earth-shattering revelations, and he's a little scared to pull further on the thread that's begun to unravel.

"I think I'd just like to have Puffy and the doctors 'round for cake," he says. It's a reasonable request, surely. He doesn't even *like* cake. Well, he's pretty sure he doesn't, anyway. The sweeter foods that Dream's given him to eat occasionally make him nauseous, so he probably won't like cake, either. But birthday cake is a staple, and Theseus wants to feel like things are normal. Just for a minute. That's all. He looks up at Dream and smiles. "Just some cake."

Dream tilts his head. "That's it? That's the only thing you want?" he asks, prodding like he wants to find the lie, but there's no lie to be found. At least, not with this. Theseus feels like anything more would be exhausting. A part of him feels selfish for even considering asking for more. And when Dream realizes that that's truly all Theseus wants, his eyes crinkle again. "Well, I don't see why we can't do that for you."

"Thanks, Dream," Theseus says. He takes another bite. Swallows it. The silence feels entirely too suffocating. He wonders what kind of cake he should ask for. Surely he should ask for something simple; he might actually be able to stomach it that way, and he doesn't want anyone to go to too much trouble or anything. *Strawberry is... someone's favorite.* "Strawberry cake would be nice."

Strawberries in the garden. The bushes are probably dead-from the winter-but he'll bring them back again, he always does.

Who will?

Someone will. Someone he knows. Someone that likes to garden. Theseus gets a fleeting memory of giving a crow a coin, but it's gone before he can try to dig deeper into it.

Dream hums. "Yeah. We can do strawberry," he says, and Theseus keeps himself from leaning away when Dream walks up to him. "Will you be okay on your own until Ponk comes to check on you, or is your brain doing its whole... freak-out thing again?"

"I'll be alright," Theseus lies, smile not meeting his eyes, and Dream starts to head towards the door.

"Good. Try not to cause any problems, alright? Last thing I need is for my work to get interrupted again," he jokes. Theseus nods. "George will come get you in the morning, I'll meet you guys at the testing room."

He leaves, and Theseus traces a W into the sheets.

Hope y'all liked this chapter!! A glimmer of hope in an angst-filled cavern lol

Chapter summary:

As Dream is taking Tommy back to the facility, they pass by someone who's smoking, and the smell of it triggers something in Tommy's memory. He and Puffy have a very covert conversation about it, and Tommy's left wondering what about his existence here is actually real. Dream reminds Tommy that his "birthday" is coming up, and Tommy asks Dream to invite Puffy and the doctors 'round for some cake.

polaroids

Chapter 69: polaroids

Ranboo is privy to some important information, and Techno and Tubbo take a moment to reflect.

Heh. 69. Nice.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Tubbo gives the crowd a wave and swings off over the horizon.

After another staged fight, he's been left with just a couple scratches, but there's still been no public appearances from 404. He, Sapnap, and Quackity have all been trying to draw George out, but with no luck yet. Tubbo swears under his breath as he makes a hard landing in Tommy's usual alleyway, rolling his shoulder. Quackity had gotten a good hit in-not intentionally, of course, but still-and he's guessing there's a dark bruise already blooming there. Techno will probably help him take care of it later.

As Shroud whirs back into the chestpiece of the hoodie, Tubbo sighs and takes the mask off, glad to have it gone. Everything that he says comes out in Tommy's voice when he's got it on, and Tubbo's *really* starting to hate it. He'd started off hating it, too, but now it's just a constant reminder of the fact that the longer they're taking to break in, the longer Tommy's having to go through whatever it is Dream's putting him through.

Tubbo tucks the mask and hoodie into the duffel bag. It's hidden underneath the dumpster now rather than behind it, given the fact that Tubbo just isn't strong enough to move it that far. As he reaches to undo the suit, someone makes a strangled noise behind him, and Tubbo whirls around, eyes wide as he meets Ranboo's.

Oh, for *fuck's sake*.

"Don't say anything," Tubbo says quickly, and Ranboo's jaw remains dropped, though no sound comes out. Okay. He can do this. He can handle this. How would Tommy handle this? "I'm not actually Spider-Man, I swear, I'm just... filling in...?"

He's handled this very stupidly thus far.

So it's safe to say that he's handling it exactly like Tommy would.

"Wh-and you-but you're not-so *who?* A-And *how?!?*" Ranboo asks, half a yell and half a whisper, gesturing vaguely with frantic hands, and Tubbo rubs a hand over his face in exasperation. Ranboo points at him with both hands accusatorily. "You!"

"Me?" Tubbo asks, wondering what the hell Ranboo's on about, and Ranboo gestures again, to the duffel and the suit and Tubbo's face. "I hate to break it to you, but you're gonna have to elaborate a bit more than *that*, bossman."

Ranboo makes a choked noise halfway between a laugh and a scream, and Tubbo patiently waits for his brain to catch up with the rest of him. "So... you're Spider-Man, but you're *not* Spider-Man? And... you know who Spider-Man actually is?" Ranboo asks once he's gathered himself enough, and Tubbo nods.

"Yeah, that's, uh, right on the money," Tubbo tells him. "Tommy got kidnapped, so I've been stepping in while we come up with a plan to rescue him-"

"Tommy got *kidnapped?!?* Is that why he's missing?!" Ranboo asks, and Tubbo winces. Ah, right, he hadn't exactly disclosed that bit of information just yet. He hadn't wanted to worry Ranboo more than strictly necessary. And, to be perfectly honest, Tubbo hadn't wanted

yet another person's mental state to keep track of. Ranboo's eyes go even wider, if that's possible. "Oh. Oh, you're *joking*. No way he's-there's no *way*. Tommy's not-"

"He is," Tubbo says. Better to break the news quickly and sweep the aftermath up efficiently. "I don't think there's any point in hiding it from you now. Tommy is Spider-Man."

Ranboo seems to go through six hundred emotions all at once. "Oh," he says, and Tubbo would normally find his just-been-punched-in-the-face-with-information tone of voice slightly amusing, but this isn't exactly ideal. "Well... that explains a lot."

"That's what I thought, too. Then I got pissed at him," Tubbo says. "Can't exactly be mad at a guy that's just been kidnapped, though, can you?"

"No," Ranboo says numbly, "I *really* can't."

Tubbo shifts uncomfortably. The fake suit isn't really made to be worn for more than an hour or two, and he's pushing three at the moment. "Uh, d'you mind-"

Ranboo straightens up. "Oh! Yeah. Right, my bad," he says, and he turns around. Tubbo changes into the street clothes he'd stashed in the duffel, and he clears his throat. Ranboo turns back around and gestures out again. "So, you're-you are *currently* acting as Spider-Man."

"Yeah."

"Great."

"Cool."

"Mhm."

"This isn't awkward at all," Tubbo says, grinning despite himself.

"Definitely not," Ranboo returns easily, hands in his pockets. "And as your at-the-moment best friend, considering your other best friend has apparently been kidnapped, I can assure you that I'm totally not

freaking out internally.”

Tubbo nods. “Of course you’re not,” he says. “There’s no reason to. It’s not as if this entire situation is completely and utterly fucked, and brushing it off with humor to cope surely won’t be counterproductive or harmful in any way whatsoever.”

Stifling a laugh, Ranboo grins at him. “We’re totally gonna be cool about this,” he says. “I’m extremely calm, as a matter of fact. There’s no way I’m going through the past couple of months and replaying everything I’ve ever said and done involving Spider-Man. Not me. Nope.”

“And I’m not feeling a multitude of emotions at the moment,” Tubbo says. “I know exactly how I feel about this situation, and I will *definitely* not need to unpack this in therapy whenever I get around to going.”

The two of them sort of laugh-kind of delirious and kind of genuine-and Ranboo’s face falls, his expression quickly morphing into one of worry. “Wait, but you-Tubbo, you don’t have powers,” he says, and Tubbo laughs a little more.

“Yeah, uh. The situation around the fights is a bit... complicated,” he settles on, and Ranboo nods hesitantly. Tubbo clears his throat. “Right, well, I-thanks for not freaking out, but I really should get going-”

“No, hey, hang on a second,” Ranboo tells him, and Tubbo winces. “You’re gonna have to explain this whole thing to me, I’m-Tubbo, this is more than a little insane.”

That’s... fair. That’s definitely fair.

So Tubbo explains everything. He glances around the alleyway, checks his phone to make sure the CCTV in the alleyway is disabled, and pulls Ranboo further down just to be safe. He tells Ranboo every detail he can remember, tells him the good, the bad, and the ugly. He finds himself backtracking every so often-forgetting the chronological order of things or remembering something tangential-but for the most part, he tells the whole story. And he

does it with a surprisingly minimal amount of tears.

He's told people before; he's had to break the news to Kristin and Wilbur, after all. But he hasn't gotten to *confess* it. That's what this is, really. It's a confession of guilt and responsibility and pain, and Tubbo knows that he wouldn't be able to say it to anyone but Ranboo. It's harder now, given he doesn't have the help of Phil and Techno to back him up, but it's so much more *cathartic*. He can tell Ranboo the whole truth without omitting the bits where he feels *angry*, gets pissed off at Tommy for making stupid and impulsive decisions. He can talk about how *he* feels, what *he's* been going through, all without the worry that it'll just do more harm than good in terms of planning for the rescue mission.

Tubbo hasn't really gotten the chance to vent about much of it all, so he hopes he's not letting any of that pent-up bullshit cloud the facts. At the same time, though, he can't really bring himself to be too torn up about it. He deserves to be a little mad, deserves to feel all of the anger and hurt and heartbreak that comes with this shit.

When he's done, though, Ranboo is staring at him in shock again. "Okay, I really need you to say something here, bossman," Tubbo says, nervous. Ranboo says nothing. He's probably processing, and that's great and all, but they're still standing in an alleyway, and Tubbo's still got to get back to the house before everyone gets worried. "Ranboo? You alright?"

Ranboo takes a deep breath. "Okay, so that was... a lot," he says, and Tubbo laughs, out of disbelief and a bit of pure hysteria. "Tubbo, are you, like-are you okay?"

Tubbo blinks.

Is he okay?

He's not entirely sure. Logically, he knows that it's fine for him to *not* be okay. Tubbo's still wrestling with the emotional side of things, though. He feels like he has to be fine, at least for now, at least until they get Tommy back. He wants to have a full-scale breakdown sometimes, though. He wants to have the kind of breakdown that scares people, that scares *himself*; Tubbo wants the kind of

breakdown that feels so overwhelming and cathartic all at once that there's nothing left but contentment once it's over.

"I don't think I'm okay," he says slowly, and Ranboo gives him an almost indecipherable look, concern and worry and some other things that Tubbo can't be bothered to try to understand written on his face. Tubbo shakes his head. "But I can wait. I'll have a good cry later, bossman, I've things to do. We're on borrowed time."

"Tommy's really just-he's been yinked, huh?" Ranboo says, and Tubbo lets out a bark of a laugh in surprise. Ranboo laughs a little himself and runs a hand through his hair. His face goes a bit somber then. "Tubbo, I think I should tell you something. Is it okay if-can I?"

Tubbo crosses his arms and steps forward, unsure of where this is going. "Yeah, Ranboo, of course you can," he says, earnest. Even if he's going through his own emotional hurricane, he wants to help Ranboo through his. If he can. "Anything."

Shifting uncomfortably, Ranboo scratches the back of his neck. "I've... this is gonna sound insane, I know. But I've been having these, like, memory issues, I guess? It's sort of-I mean, I can remember things just fine, it's not some short-term loss or anything like that," he says, and Tubbo nods for him to go ahead. Ranboo clears his throat. "I just... I keep waking up-well, I guess 'waking up' isn't the right term for it, but-I come to consciousness in places that I *know* I wasn't in before. It's like I... I black out, a-and then I go somewhere, I do something, whatever it is, and by the time I feel like myself again-by the time I'm, like, aware-I don't remember what happened. It's... I'm missing chunks of time, Tubbo, and I'm *scared*."

Tubbo puts a hand on Ranboo's shoulder. "Holy shit, that's-thanks for telling me," he says, because he's not really sure what to say. This probably has something to do with Dream; Tubbo can't be sure, but what else would be fucking with Ranboo's memory? Tubbo's brows furrow. "Is it-are you safe? Are you getting hurt?"

Ranboo shakes his head. "No, there's nothing wrong *physically*, it's just missing chunks in my memory, and I... I think that it might have something to do with Tommy," he confesses, quiet and *scared*, and

Tubbo feels his heart drop.

Fuck.

There's no way in hell. There's no way Dream's going to take yet another friend of his. "First and foremost, I'm not gonna let anything happen to you, I swear," Tubbo says firmly, and Ranboo nods, though he seems a bit uneasy still. "Second, what do you mean by that? Why d'you think it's got something to do with Tommy?"

Ranboo winces. "I just-I can't *explain* it, it's sort of... a feeling, y'know? Like, I didn't know it before or anything, but you telling me what was going on turned a proverbial light on or something," he says, and Tubbo tries to think of more details, something more closely connected with Dream, maybe. Ranboo shakes his head. "It's not a memory, it's more like... like a puzzle piece. When you were talking about Tommy, I-it wasn't that you were telling me to do anything, but there was-you mentioned Spider-Man and Tommy and that one project and all of those things, and... ugh, this is gonna sound crazy."

"I promise you," Tubbo says, "there is nothing you can say that will out-crazy all of the crazy shit I've already been through."

"Right, you're right," Ranboo mutters. "When you were mentioning all that stuff with Dream, it was like-I wasn't compelled to listen to *you*, but my brain sort of... got ready to...? O-Or I guess it might've been the memory of it? God, I don't know, Tubbo, I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize, it's... it's alright," Tubbo says, even as he gets the sinking feeling that it is not, in fact, alright. His phone starts to buzz, and he groans. "Shit. I have to go before Phil sends a search party for me. Will you... will you be alright?"

While he seems a bit uncertain, Ranboo nods. "Yeah, I'll stay safe. I won't tell anyone anything either," he reassures, and Tubbo appreciates it. "I won't even tell any of my protesting buddies, I promise."

Tubbo nods. He feels uneasy still. Not entirely sure of what to say and feeling rather annoyed that his phone is still incessantly

buzzing, Tubbo gives Ranboo's shoulder a firm pat. "You stay safe, alright? Don't get kidnapped on me," he half-jokes. "I've already got two loved ones snatched away, last thing I need's a third."

Ranboo laughs weakly. "I'll be careful," he says. "I'll stick to big groups of people, tell people to stop me if I start to wander off."

"I'll see you later," Tubbo says instead of thanking him, because he knows that if he did, Ranboo would just brush it off, tell him it's nothing. "Check in with me, alright?"

"Alright," Ranboo agrees, and it's as good as a promise.

Once he apologizes for giving everyone a bit of a scare, Tubbo finds himself alone in the living room with Foolish and Techno.

Foolish hands him a mug of coffee, made strong as hell with a shot of redbull in it. In spite of Tubbo's best efforts to fend it off, his mind starts to spiral. *Tommy always hates it when you put redbull in your coffee. If he were here, he would have called it gross. He would have laughed and you would have laughed. Then you would've put a bunch of caffeine tablets in his coffee to make it have an effect, because Tommy would have whined about the coffee being useless if you hadn't. He would have insisted you use the stupid bee-shaped mug he bought for you years ago. This one is Tommy's. It's not yours. This one was his favorite-*

Is, Tubbo reminds himself. *It is his favorite.*

"You, uh... doin' okay?" Foolish asks him, a hand on his shoulder, and Tubbo nods. He takes a sip of the coffee. Foolish put too much sugar in it. *Tommy would have known to only put a spoonful and a half.* Tubbo just takes another sip. Foolish shifts in place, glancing over to Techno. "You guys are really quiet today, huh?"

From his spot over on the far end of the sofa, Techno grunts. Tubbo sips his coffee. *The room is too quiet. Tommy would have broken the silence with a joke by now.* "Not much to say right now, is there?" Tubbo hums, because he's not Tommy, and he doesn't

really feel like joking around. Foolish shrugs. Tubbo narrows his eyes playfully, and Foolish gives him a good-natured grin. “How are *you* feeling, then, bossman?”

“As fine as I can, considering my mom got kidnapped by a supervillain,” Foolish says, just as easily honest as he’s always been. He rubs a spot over his chest, almost unconsciously, and Tubbo makes a mental note to ask him about it later. There’s something hidden-sad and understanding-in Foolish’s expression when he turns to Techno again. “You *gotta* stop looking at it, man. It’s just gonna make you more miserable.”

Tubbo hadn’t paid much mind to Techno when he’d come into the living room. *Tommy would have noticed. Tommy would have bugged Techno into telling him what’s wrong.* Now, though, he sees that Techno’s got a box in his lap, unopened and eerily familiar. It’s a shoebox; Tubbo remembers that it had once contained a multitude of gifts, gathered by Spider-Man activists and given to Tommy after a particularly hard patrol.

Now, though, it’s clearly got something else in it, and judging by the haunted expression on Techno’s face, it’s something that Tubbo’s not entirely sure he wants to see.

“What’s in there, Techno?” Tubbo asks, a bit nervous, and Techno just sighs. He’s got a look on his face like he can’t quite decide whether to answer-or maybe he’s still deliberating on whether to open the box, Tubbo doesn’t know-and Tubbo scoots down on the couch until he can poke the box. “Unless Tommy’s keeping bugs in there, I don’t think whatever’s in that box is gonna bite you. And while I wouldn’t put it past him to keep bugs in his room, they would’ve gotten out by now, I think.”

Foolish has that same look on his face still, like he knows what Techno’s going through. And while on some level, sure, Tubbo supposes Foolish is probably just as miserable as the rest of them in regards to what happened to Tommy, it seems like a deeper kind of understanding than that. “Unless you’re gonna open it, you might wanna put it back,” Foolish says gently, and Tubbo glances between him and Techno, wondering if there’s anything he’s missed. Foolish walks over to Techno and puts a hand on his shoulder. “I’m gonna

check on Wilbur. You go ahead and... do whatever it is you need to."

Techno nods, and Foolish ruffles Tubbo's hair on his way out. Tubbo nudges Techno's arm with his elbow and taps the box. "What's in there?" he asks again, more subdued. Techno hums noncommittally and shifts his fingers on the box. Tubbo sips his coffee. "You should listen to Foolish, y'know. He might be a bit of a dumbass sometimes, but he's really good with, like, the emotional side of shit."

"And I'm not?" Techno asks flatly, clearly a joke, and Tubbo snorts. Techno's expression shifts slightly twice-once where the corners of his mouth perk up in a half-smile and again where his brief amusement falls. "Wilbur gave it to me, actually. He was going through Tommy's stuff, cleanin' his room up, y'know? I told him not to do that-makes it feel like Tommy's not just missing, makes it feel like he's... well, anyway, I'm-I've got this box now, and..."

He trails off, and Tubbo nods. He knows what Techno means, knows very well that he'll probably shed his own tears if he goes to hole himself up in Tommy's room like he normally does. Tubbo has half a mind to find Wilbur and chew him out for it, but he understands why Wilbur had felt the need to clean. Tubbo doesn't want Tommy to come home to a messy room either, after all.

"You'll never know how you feel about it if you don't give yourself a kick in the ass and get it over with," Tubbo tells him, all blunt honesty, and Techno gives him an appreciative look. "The more you think about what it could be, the longer you spend not knowing. The dwelling is worse than whatever the aftermath ends up being. At least in my experience."

"You know, you're the only person that's talked to me like I'm not about to break," Techno tells him. "I think you're the only person that really *gets* it. Phil and Kristin-they've gotta be parents, and they're reacting like parents, and Wil... well, he doesn't-it's not fair to say that he doesn't get it, because I know exactly how horrible it is for him right now, but he *doesn't*. And Foolish is nice and all, but I think if he offers me one more hug, I'm gonna kill him."

Tubbo laughs. "I mean, you and I have basically been in on this

whole thing since the start,” he says, and Techno raises a brow at him. Tubbo puts his hands up in front of his chest in surrender. “Okay, okay, you figured it out first, dickhead, I’ll give you that, but my point still stands. I think... I think everybody got a shit lot, but it’s worse when you’ve been watching the train derail from the very beginning.”

There’s that faintly amused look again, and Techno runs a thumb over where the lid of the shoebox meets the side. “He’s a real stubborn kid,” he says quietly. “Wouldn’t give it up. Not for anything. I kept lookin’ at him and... I felt so *much*. And I feel so *guilty*. I spent so much time-I *wasted* so much time. And he still... sometimes I wonder if he knows how proud I am.”

“He’s always wanted to impress you, y’know,” Tubbo tells him, because it’s true. “You’re his hero, I think. You and Wil.”

“Nah,” Techno says, “I’m pretty sure you are.”

And *oh*.

If that doesn’t just feel like a punch in the gut.

Tubbo swallows hard around the sudden lump in his throat and nods towards the box. “Can you open it now? Before I start weeping like a total idiot?” he jokes, and Techno laughs. He does open the box, though, and his face falls immediately. One glance into the box makes Tubbo’s eyes go wide. “Oh, *shit*.”

Polaroids.

Dozens of them.

Most of them are recent, but there are a good few that have clearly been taken from photo albums with great care, faint lines of adhesive sticking to the corners. Tubbo reaches in for one with his own face in it, remembers the day it had been taken so clearly that it makes his breath catch in his throat.

“C’mon, just let me-”

“Absolutely not,” Tubbo had said, one hand over the lens of the

camera, the other busy tapping away at one of his keyboards. Tommy had groaned and yanked the camera away again, probably fixing whatever it is Tubbo had knocked out of place. Tubbo had glanced up at him, had squinted at Tommy's dangling form and rolled his eyes. "Get off my ceiling, moron."

Tommy had grinned. "Absolutely not," he had parroted. Tubbo had wanted to strangle him, but he'd just turned back to his monitors. "Tubbo. Tubs. Big T. Please. C'mon. Just one picture, I swear, and then I won't bother you again-"

"And what are you gonna do if someone finds it?" Tubbo had scoffed. "Can't exactly explain away the fact you're in your suit on my ceiling."

"Okay, but consider-it would be really funny," Tommy had said, and Tubbo had flipped him off without looking. "Please, man! I don't ask you for much-"

"You ask me for a lot of shit. Daily, actually-"

"-and you are my incredibly cool and amazing guy in the chair and world renowned best friend, and I just think I need an extra token of our friendship-"

"-and I will not entertain this particular shenanigan of yours-"

"I will start webbing your things to the ceiling," Tommy had threatened, and Tubbo had glared at him, arms crossed over his chest in defiance. Tommy had jumped down from the ceiling then, landing effortlessly on his feet and setting the camera on the desk in order to dust his hands off. "Really, Tubbo, you ought to clean up there, it's so dusty."

"You're the only person that would care about having it clean," Tubbo had told him, and Tommy had stuck his tongue out. Tubbo had grabbed the camera again, turning it over carefully. He hadn't wanted to break it or anything, not when he'd known how much it had meant to Tommy. "You wouldn't even be able to show people the picture if you end up taking it."

"I know that," Tommy had huffed, all defensive, and then he'd gotten a bit more subdued, pink in the face with embarrassment. "I've already got some with everybody else, I just don't have any with you yet, and really, Tubbo, that just doesn't seem fair."

Tubbo had raised an eyebrow then, amused. "Clingy," he'd said, and Tommy had narrowed his eyes, yanking Tubbo out of his chair by his collar and dangling him over the floor like a cat by the scruff of its neck. Tubbo had yelped and swatted half-heartedly at him. "Put me down, dickhead! We agreed on no using your superstrength on me!"

"Mhm, mhm, we did, and now I've changed my mind," Tommy had said, matter-of-fact, and Tubbo had kicked him in the knee. "Ow! Fuck you!"

Tubbo had been unceremoniously dropped, stumbling to stay standing. "Oh, shut up, you big baby, that didn't hurt," he'd huffed, and Tommy had stepped on his toes. Tubbo had pointed a finger at him and squinted. "I'm gonna kill you."

"Or," Tommy had said, "you could just take a picture with me."

He'd switched from teasing to hopeful then, and Tubbo hadn't had it in him to say no. "Fine, but only if you promise to keep it somewhere it won't risk your identity," Tubbo had said, finally caving, and Tommy had grinned.

"You're not gonna regret this, Big T!" he'd said, hopping back up on the ceiling and snatching his camera up to fiddle with the settings.

Tubbo had sighed and sat back down in his chair. "I sincerely doubt that," he'd muttered as Tommy had started to set the camera up. It had balanced precariously on the edge of Tubbo's monitor, and Tubbo had leaned back. "So what did you want me to do?"

"Pretend like you're typing something," Tommy had told him, and Tubbo had done as he'd asked. Tommy had fiddled with the camera a bit more, then moved into a pose behind Tubbo-he hadn't been able to see what it was. The camera flash had gone off, and Tommy had whooped, grabbing the camera again and eagerly awaiting the polaroid to finish printing.

"You're such an idiot," Tubbo had told him fondly.

"I know I am but what are you?" Tommy had shot back, then he'd frowned thoughtfully. "Wait, no, hang on, I did that wrong-Tubbo, stop laughing! No, shut up, I meant it the other way! Fuck off!"

Tubbo remembers he'd spent a solid minute or two laughing, and by the end of it, Tommy had refused to show him the picture. But now, looking down at it, Tubbo isn't laughing. He's not even smiling. He wants to, sure, but he just... can't. Not when he sees himself, fake-focused on the monitor in front of him, with Tommy on the ceiling behind him, pointing to Tubbo as if he's some celebrity. As if he'd been standing next to a world wonder rather than his best friend. Then Tubbo looks down at the writing on the bottom of the polaroid.

There, in thick red sharpie, is Tommy's sprawling, messy writing, spelling out:

BEST GUY IN THE CHAIR EVER!!!

He doesn't even bother to try to hide the way it feels like a knife to the chest.

It's easier to look at Techno, to watch for his reaction to whichever polaroid he's taken out, than to confront the photo in his hand. "Which one have you got?" Tubbo asks quietly, not trusting that his voice won't break if he speaks at a normal volume, and Techno tears his eyes away from the polaroid he's holding. Tubbo flips the one he's got towards him, a sad smile on his face. "I forgot about this."

Techno smiles back, though it's shaky, and he flips his own around. It's a picture of him and Tommy, shoulder to shoulder. Techno's hair is pulled back in its usual-albeit a bit messier than normal-braid, and Tommy's got a matching braid pulling the side of his hair back away from his face. A few strands have escaped, and Tubbo knows it's probably just from Tommy talking, from him being so expressive. But the two of them have braids, and Tommy's aptly captioned it as *me and the blade-braid buddies!*

"He's so dumb," Techno says, and Tubbo politely ignores the way

his voice is thicker than it usually is. Techno laughs like a man in mourning. “‘Braid buddies.’ That’s so *stupid*. Does he know how stupid that is?”

And Tubbo suddenly realizes that he and Techno are remarkably similar. Because Tubbo knows exactly what Techno’s saying. He knows what it’s like to not be able to bring yourself to talk about what it means. He knows that it’s easier to talk about how stupid it is rather than how much it makes you want to cry. He knows that Techno’s not actually asking if Tommy knows how stupid the use of the term ‘braid buddies’ is.

Tubbo knows that Techno’s asking if Tommy knows how much it means to him.

“Yeah,” Tubbo tells him, “it’s so stupid.”

And Techno knows that Tubbo is telling him that the answer is yes.

It shows in the way his shoulders drop, the way his breathing gets a bit quicker in his attempts to keep himself in check. Tubbo would tell him it’s okay to cry it out, but he has a sneaking suspicion that Techno would react the same way he would to that. That is to say, Tubbo’s not trying to get his ass kicked.

So Tubbo just sits there with Techno, offers his presence as what he hopes is a comfort. Maybe just the knowledge that someone understands, the knowledge that Techno is sitting next to a mirror image of his own grief, will be enough.

Tubbo isn’t great with words, isn’t great at reading how to properly comfort people. It’s easiest with Tommy, who shouts what he wants from the rooftops, and Tubbo doesn’t have to play any guessing games. With Tommy, Tubbo never has to guess whether a complaint is Tommy subtly asking for advice or just Tommy needing to complain for the sake of it and wanting someone there to agree with him. Tommy just tells him straight-up how he’s feeling and what he needs, he doesn’t make Tubbo go through hoops to try and guess at what the right way to react is.

And while Techno isn’t openly telling him, while it isn’t as easy as it

is with Tommy, Tubbo can see his own reactions in Techno's, understands his reactions more than he's understood anyone else's so far. Tubbo, admittedly, doesn't know Techno all that well beyond what he's learned over the past couple of months. He'd grown up half in his own house and half in the Watsons', but since Techno and Tommy hadn't been close, Tubbo hadn't been close to Techno either.

It had always been Tubbo-and-Tommy. Sometimes it would be Wilbur-and-Tommy-and-Tubbo, because Tubbo and Tommy had always been extensions of one another, and if Tommy wanted to hang out with Wilbur while Tubbo was there, Tubbo would hang out with Wilbur too. But since there hadn't been a Techno-and-Tommy, there'd never been a Techno-and-Tommy-and-Tubbo either.

Even in spite of that, even in spite of the estrangement-once-removed, Tubbo looks at Techno and sees himself.

He sees a brother mourning over a brother.

"How is it that I'm haunted by someone that isn't even dead?" Techno asks him, and Tubbo doesn't have an answer. Techno looks down at the polaroids, sifts through them, and Tubbo reads a couple of the captions. Some of them are just stupid little jokes, some are dated, and others are untitled. The ones without writing are pictures of the sky-sunsets, sunrises, constellations-and Tubbo wonders if Tommy had taken them on patrols. If he had, it had to have been when Tubbo hadn't been on the comms. *These are meant to be private*, one part of his mind whispers. Techno looks to him, expression carefully blank. "It's been weeks, Tubbo. It's the middle of March and he's still... I just don't know if I can live with myself if we don't do *something*."

Tubbo looks down at the box of polaroids again, finds one buried towards the bottom. It's him, Phil, and Techno, all chatting in the living room, and there it is in red sharpie: *World's Best Spider-Squad*. There's even a little spider drawn next to it.

"It's taking too long," Tubbo agrees, eyes burning as he stares down at his own face. The three of them had been laughing in that picture. At what, he doesn't remember. But the three of them-happy, smiling,

laughing-are framed forever in a polaroid. With limited film, Tommy had chosen to capture their joy. Of anything he could have taken a picture of, the things that are most important, most cherished, are the people around him. The jokes they share.

“There are only a few with him in frame,” Techno notes softly. He almost seems surprised. “It’s mostly... mostly the rest of us.”

Tommy wouldn't have waited this long.

Tubbo stands up.

If it were you, Tommy would have gotten you out by now.

“Fuck this,” he says. “Fuck the planning, fuck being careful, *fuck* not taking chances. We need to get Tommy back. I don’t care what it takes, I don’t care about the risks-we have to stop stalling.”

“I’ll call Quackity,” Techno tells him, “you get the others.”

Tubbo steps out into the hall.

He’s done waiting.

End of chapter summary: Ranboo catches Tubbo changing out of the suit in an alleyway, so Tubbo explains everything that's happened. Ranboo reveals that he's been getting lapses in his memory. When Tubbo returns to the Watson household, he and Techno look at some polaroids that Tommy had taken, and Tubbo reflects on a particularly fond memory. Tubbo decides that he's done waiting to act.

[Go check out this absolutely incredible art!!!](#)

Also, I have (Finally? Stupidly?) made a Twitter account! I'm @fathermooshroom on there, so come say hi or follow or tag me in art if you'd like!! :D

TO

Chapter 70: TO

Happy birthday, Theseus.

Hi! It's been a month and I'm terribly sorry about that, my life's been a bit hectic lately. But hey!! I have a lot more time now that my finals are over (and I have a lot less writer's block) so yay! Chapter 70 is up at last!

And holy shit??? 5k kudos and 200k hits???? That's actually insane and you are all so very cool :)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Theseus doesn't think he's ever been this excited in his entire life.

Well, maybe that's not true, but he doesn't remember enough of his life to really dispute it. He'd been ridiculously excited to go outside, too, but this takes the cake-pun only a bit intended. To think, a birthday party, all for him. Theseus hasn't had the chance to do much of anything for himself lately. *That's a lie*, part of his mind whispers, and it sounds suspiciously like Dream, *you only ever do anything for yourself*. Theseus shoves that feeling down and focuses on the fact that he's going to have a party today. It's gonna be incredible!

He spends all day tidying up his room. It doesn't take him long to make his bed, even in the dim light, but he does spend the rest of

the time he's got going back and forth from the bathroom with various washcloths to dust and clean every corner of the room. Theseus wants things to be *perfect* so that everyone has a good time at the party.

He's fixing the chair for the sixth time-just making sure that it's exactly centered against the desk-when the door opens, and he dutifully closes his eyes until it's shut again. To his surprise, it's Dream, a cake held in his hands. "Oh! Hey, Dream, I didn't think you'd be here so early!" Theseus chirps, and Dream raises a brow at him. Theseus blinks and scrambles to correct himself. "Well, not that I didn't think you'd be on time, o-of course, because you're never late, I just-it's a pleasant surprise!"

Dream hums. "Yeah, alright," he says, like he's decided something, and Theseus tries not to let the sudden spike of anxiety he feels show on his face. Dream nods towards the desk. "Why don't you move it to the center of the room? That way, there's enough room for everybody. And I'm not gonna lie, my arms are getting a little tired."

Theseus hurries to drag the desk into the center of the room. It's not nearly as difficult to pull it over as he'd thought, which is odd, but he pays that no mind. Dream sets the cake down in the center of the table-Theseus's stomach churns at the idea of eating something so sweet-and Theseus beams at him.

"How long is it gonna be 'til everyone else gets here?" Theseus asks, and Dream hums again, seemingly uncertain.

"Well, I've still gotta ask. Let me go do that now," he says, and he nods towards the chair. "You just sit tight, I'll be back soon with everybody who wants to be here."

Nodding eagerly, Theseus sits down and dutifully shuts his eyes as Dream leaves the room, only opening them again when he's sure the door is shut. He'll just wait here with the cake until Dream gets back. That's all he has to do. Just... wait for a little while. That's not so hard. Theseus likes to think he's become quite patient.

He hadn't started off as a very patient person-it had been one of

Dream's main gripes with his behavior at the beginning-but now, Theseus has no problem waiting. Good things come to those who wait, and those impatient enough to complain about it tend to invoke a little bit of wrath. That's never fun.

It's never fun when there are hands wrapped around Theseus's throat, when there's a knife plunged into his chest, when he's choking on his own bile and trying desperately to replace the blood in his lungs with air.

Don't be silly, Theseus chastises himself, those are all just... nightmares.

But they don't *feel* like nightmares. There are new shiny pink scars appearing every day, the flesh raised and jagged and tender to the touch. Theseus *knows* it's real, feels it in the back of his throat like a lingering bad taste. But Dream is his brother (*is he?*) and he cares about Theseus (*no he doesn't*), so Theseus has promised himself not to think about it too much.

He looks down at the cake. It looks like it's strawberry. Just like he'd asked for. Someone likes strawberries. Theseus doesn't remember who. He never remembers who. It feels like every time he tries, whatever memory he's attempting to recollect slips further and further from his fingers. But he knows that *someone* likes strawberries, that they're different from the *someone* who smokes.

The W.

Theseus's hands have started to shake. He should probably put a stop to it before Dream gets back. Dream never likes it when his hands are shaking. Theseus just can't help it sometimes, though. Everything feels like too much, all at once, and he ends up shaking like a leaf because of it. He doesn't *try* to, obviously, even if Dream's convinced that Theseus only starts getting shaky and anxious for the sake of being dramatic.

Flair for theatrics. Melodramatic bastard.

Theseus blinks rapidly. It would be silly for him to stay so focused on whoever this 'W' person is, especially when Dream's made it clear

he disapproves of Theseus's attempts to remember things too quickly. Theseus doesn't want to accidentally give himself brain damage or anything (*it wouldn't, it wouldn't, he's lying about that too*), not when his psyche already feels like a fragile, splintered piece of glass. It's hard enough to hold himself steady, let alone when his hands are shaky like this.

He's been with someone for things like this before. Sitting on bathroom tiles. In a school. But he doesn't go to school. Dream says he's too sick for that. In his room. The television is on. His eyes are too sensitive to look at screens. A soft voice. A hand on his shoulder. Understanding. Someone understands. He pokes their forehead.

"He would never believe you were open and honest about your feelings with anyone, so even if I tried, he'd tell me I'm lying," someone says. Theseus shudders. Who wouldn't believe that person? Dream? Would Dream not believe them? Or was it a joke? Yes. That feels right. It must have been a joke. A friend. That's what you do with friends, you joke with them, you tease them, you annoy the shit out of them and they smile anyway because they love you, they're your friends, they care about you, they would never let anyone hurt you like this, they must all be worried sick-

Theseus exhales sharply, like he's been punched in the gut.

No more thinking about that.

Puffy would want him to think about it, though. Puffy would be proud of him. She would be tracing letters into his hand, giving him discreet nods or shakes of the head, like she has been for the very few times they've gotten to spend time together since Theseus had come back from the little excursion outside. Puffy always looks so hopeful when he remembers things.

Is she really his mum?

She's familiar. Familiar in a way Dream isn't, like he's known her longer. *You shouldn't be thinking about this*, some part of his brain whispers. *Dream wouldn't like it.*

Yeah, well, Theseus is currently sitting in front of a cake that looks sweet enough to cause a cavity if he stares too hard at it, so they've both done something the other wouldn't like.

There's something in Theseus that curls up warmly in his chest at the small act of defiance. Even calling it defiance is stretching it a bit. Dream can't read his *mind*, so just thinking about things isn't really an act of rebellion, so long as Theseus doesn't mention it. He can just lie if Dream asks him.

Okay, the idea of *that* is slightly more nerve-wracking.

Baby steps, Theseus. Baby steps.

Dream still hasn't returned. Theseus isn't sure how much time has passed, given that he doesn't really have access to a clock, but surely it's enough time to have gathered everyone. Theseus isn't a fan of being alone. He kind of hates isolation, actually. But surely, *surely* there's a reason that Dream's been gone for a while, right?

Theseus waits.

He can wait patiently. He can do this. He'll just count the divots in the padded ceiling. Or the walls. Or the floor. The whole room is padded, after all-which is *nice*. It's not sinister. His brain really ought to stop insisting that it is-so there are a lot of divots to work with. Ooh! Or maybe he can count the sprinkles on the cake! He's never done *that* before, maybe that'll be fun!

Theseus tries to smile, but it feels more like a grimace. This is easily one of his more pathetic attempts at making his situation seem better than it actually is. Counting *sprinkles*, honestly, who the hell is he fooling? That's not fun. Well, some people might find it fun, but it's certainly not *Theseus's* idea of fun. It's mind-numbing. It's just like every other thing he does between treatments and visits with Puffy-a desperate attempt at passing the time, even though the passage of time here brings nothing but pain with it.

Okay. Counting the sprinkles on the cake is better than spiraling. It'll probably take him long enough that Dream will be here by the time he's done. Everyone will be here! It'll be a party! If everyone's here,

maybe Theseus won't feel so horrible. Maybe he'll even get to have fun. That would be cool. He doesn't have a lot of fun these days.

He honestly can't recall when he last had any kind of fun, other than the little excursion outside.

Depressing. Those thoughts are *depressing*, and he can't get himself all worked up over nothing, not when people are coming to visit him! Right. He should count the sprinkles.

...

There are four hundred and ninety-eight sprinkles covering the entire cake. Give or take a few. Theseus is pretty sure he's counted a couple of them more than once.

Well, there's four hundred and ninety-eight sprinkles on the cake and Dream still isn't here, so Theseus will just have to find something else to do while he waits. He could walk the perimeter of the room a couple of times. Then again, he hasn't had much to eat today, and he doesn't want to waste any of the precious energy he has.

He'd had a treatment this morning-yesterday morning? Theseus's concept of time has always been a little wonky-and the exhaustion from it still lurks behind his ribcage, like a cat waiting to pounce at any moment. The treatment had been one of the easier ones, just a few jabs in the arm and a couple of weird-tasting medicines, but every treatment takes a toll on him. He's starting to get a little tired of getting bloodwork done. Lately, Ponk's hands have been shaking so badly that Hannah's taken over most of his usual duties.

Hannah is nice and all, but Theseus is really starting to miss Ponk's usual presence. Ponk at least makes an effort to talk to him, to keep Theseus company while he's stabbing syringes into Theseus's arms, but Hannah is way more business-oriented. She's usually in and out within a few minutes, and the two of them hardly exchange anything more than brief pleasantries.

At least Theseus can still talk to Puffy. Maybe Dream will even bring her here for the party! And oh, wouldn't *that* be something? Surely,

Theseus and Puffy wouldn't be able to get away with having one of their secret memory conversations while Dream is physically in the room, but he could still talk to Puffy about almost anything else! He really does miss her when she's not here. Puffy's quite nice to him, after all, even if she always says his name like it leaves a bad taste in her mouth.

He could've sworn that she'd almost said a different name one time.

Theseus shakes his head. He shouldn't be thinking about that right now. He's got enough on his plate with all these people coming to see him, after all. At least he'd tidied up. *Had he tidied up? Hadn't he left his bedroom messy before he left?* No, he's sitting right here, and his room is impeccably clean. Besides, Dream would be so angry if Theseus had somehow managed to make a mess out of the room. Not to mention that it'd be hard to do that, considering how little furniture there is here. There aren't even any knickknacks.

It feels like hours have gone by, but Theseus is pretty sure that's just his imagination. Dream always says he gets mixed up about when things happen. *Dream lies, though. He lies all the time.* Theseus doesn't want to think about whether or not Dream's lying. He just wants one day where all he has to worry about is having a nice time with everyone.

So he sits in front of the strawberry cake *strawberry like the bushes* and waits.

He pointedly doesn't think of the letter W and waits.

His leg starts to bounce anxiously. He really ought to cut that out. Dream doesn't like it when Theseus lets his nervous habits get the better of him. It seems so dumb, though; why *shouldn't* Theseus be able to be nervous? It's not as if he's causing a scene or drawing unnecessary attention to himself. No one else is even in the room!

Theseus lets his leg bounce.

He's getting antsy, he knows, but he can't help it. Surely, Dream should've been back by now. It can't possibly be taking him *this* long to gather up Puffy and his two usual doctors. Obviously, if Dream

isn't here, it must be because something's happened, right? There must be something really important for him to tend to. Otherwise he would be here. He would. *He would be here if he could. But he's fencing in a different country right now, so he can't be.*

What? That doesn't make any sense. Dream's still in the facility, and Dream doesn't fence, what the hell is Theseus even thinking about? God, none of this is productive at all. He's just been fretting over nothing for no reason, and he must seem like an absolute nutter to whoever's in charge of watching the cameras right now.

Maybe Theseus should try thinking about something else. Something easy. The candles aren't lit, so at least there's no wax dripping onto the frosting of the cake. He wonders if the candles would have been fully melted by now had Dream brought them in lit. Theseus can't light them, of course, he doesn't have matches or a lighter.

Someone's flicking a lighter. He's on a rooftop. Someone offers him a cigarette. He declines. The person with him snorts and mutters something about superheroes. For some reason, the act of the person smoking is incredibly worrisome. Why is Theseus upset he hadn't known they smoked? Is this the same person he remembered with Puffy? Is this Wi-

Theseus rubs at his eyes with the heels of his palms. Surely Dream won't be much longer. He looks down at the cake, scowling slightly at the white icing. The strawberries on the top look candied. Gross. Too sweet. Dream knows that Theseus hates sweet things, so why would he make a birthday cake even *more* sweet than strictly necessary?

But Theseus won't complain. It's better to have a cake he can't enjoy than no cake at all. He's lucky to be having any sort of birthday celebration in the first place. So he'll bite his tongue and eat the damn cake without complaint, even if the sugar's probably gonna come right back up later. Theseus sighs and slumps down a little in his chair. How long is this going to be? He's been waiting for what feels like days, but surely it can't have been *that* long.

Someone would have come to watch him by now if that were the

case. Someone would have come to poke him with needles and monitor his vitals. Someone would have been assigned to make sure he doesn't do anything.

Theseus tries to sit up straight and fake a smile. Maybe Dream is watching the cameras, and maybe he's misinterpreting Theseus's impatience as dread. That might be it. If he sees that Theseus is actually looking forward to this, actually *wants* to be here, then he'll surely bring everyone in for the party!

Or he'll just take this away too, one part of his mind whispers. *He seems to have no problem withholding the few things you actually like when you make him angry.* Theseus shakes his head, even as his smile wavers. He doesn't want to be rude or seem ungrateful. And besides, whenever Dream *does* get mad and take things away, it's perfectly justified! He's never done anything without a reason to, and Theseus sure does have a bad habit of giving him reasons.

*What about the knife? What about all those 'nightmares' you've been having? What about when he gets mad at you for remembering anything at all, even if it's not on purpose? What about the fact that he's **lying** to you? What about that?*

Theseus swallows thickly. He doesn't want to think about that right now. He has one good thing, *one good thing in a whirlwind of terrible things*, and he doesn't want to have it ruined. He can worry about the W and Puffy and all the lies later. He just wants one day to be happy. He's going to have his birthday party and have a good night's rest, and he's going to enjoy himself, dammit. It's all going to be okay. He'll work it out in the end, he'll *save the day, just like you always do*, To-

The intercom chimes overhead.

"*Theseus,*" Hannah's flat voice tells him, crackling slightly, *"it's time for bed."*

For a moment, Theseus feels nothing.

His chest feels hollow as he stares down at the stupid, *stupid* cake, hands starting to shake as his eyes blur, making the four hundred

and ninety-eight sprinkles merge into a blob of rainbow color. His ears start to ring as the intercom crackles again; someone says something else, but Theseus can't hear whatever it is. Hours upon hours of waiting, and *nothing*? No one has come back for him? Not a single soul in the entire facility has decided he's worth spending time with on his *birthday*? Not even Dream?

"*Get to bed, Theseus,*" Dream's voice pierces through the ringing in his ears, and there's a weird lilt to his voice, almost as if he's holding back laughter.

His eye twitches.

Something within him snaps.

All of the lies, all of the manipulation, all of the horrible shit that Dream has put him through, and Theseus has brushed it under the rug. He's done everything that Dream's asked of him. He is, in all senses of the term, the perfect little brother, and Dream can't even be bothered to show up for, what, ten minutes? This is *bullshit*.

Theseus feels the cold numbness instantly flood over with white-hot rage.

His whole body feels alight with something positively electric, and a scream rips its way out of his throat as he doubles over in his seat, hands gripping at his scalp so hard that he'd ordinarily be worried about ripping his hair out. Theseus-unthinking, impulsive, furious-grabs the table and hurls it at the wall.

It splinters in half. The cake splatters across the padding of the wall, candied strawberries falling to the floor in a pile of mush. Theseus cannot bring himself to care.

He wants *out*.

He slams himself up against the wall, tearing at the padding with scrabbling hands and blunt fingernails, throat aching as he screams in frustration. As he thrashes and scratches and shouts, strands of hair come loose from the elastic he's tied it back with and cling to his cheeks. He tears through the fabric like a wild animal in a cage,

pulling away insulation and wood with shaking hands. Whirling on his heel, Theseus grabs the chair and, with arms that are strained, too strong to be his own, and crackling with bright blue lightning, smashes it against the wall.

As it breaks to pieces, Theseus grabs the jagged leg of it and starts to slash wildly at the walls, ignoring the tears streaming down his face as he tears the padding open. Sometimes, his arms and the strands of hair in his vision disappear, as if he's fading in and out of existence, but the electricity remains. As Theseus tries to reach past the splintered wood of the walls, fists smashing through the boards like they're nothing, the lights start to flicker.

He can't reach through the wall. He screams out again, and the lightning-fury passes over him again. The lights above him spark ferociously as electricity pulses in waves emanating from his very being, and Theseus slams his hands on where he *knows* the door is. There's a groan of metal, like he's actually getting through to the other side of it, but he needs something to tear through the fabric with again.

Theseus scrambles for the bathroom, ripping the basin of the sink out of the wall and hurling it at the door to the room. It bounces off the wall and falls to the ground, shattering on impact, and he grabs one of the jagged bits of porcelain, slashing through the padding, paying no mind to the way it cuts his hand open repeatedly. His hand won't stop healing itself over rapidly, after all.

He tears open the rest of the fabric concealing the door with his hands, hurling himself against the metal shoulder-first once he can see enough of it. Every slam leaves an impressive dent in the steel, and Theseus pounds his fists against it, screaming incoherent curses as he tries to break the damn thing off its proverbial hinges.

The lights overhead keep flickering, showering Theseus in a rain of strobing pitch-black and white, but he can't bring himself to care. The instinctual part of his brain has completely taken over, and he has no reserves about letting it destroy whatever it needs to. He *needs* to leave, needs to get out, needs to expend all of this static energy until it's gone, until all the rage and hurt and terror is gone from his mind.

With one last slam, the door completely caves, and Theseus stumbles out into the completely dark hallway. The lights here have apparently fallen to a similar fate as the ones in his room, and though they flicker occasionally, it seems as though the power is completely out for as far as he can see. Theseus doesn't *care*, though. Freedom is so close he can *taste* it. The instinct at the back of his mind roars its approval.

Theseus stumbles to a stand, splaying one hand out against the wall to support himself.

He senses the blowdart coming before he feels it hit the back of his neck, but he's exhausted himself too much to dodge it.

He can't move his body when he wakes.

Looking down at himself, Theseus realizes that this is due to the multiple, incredibly heavy restraints on each of his limbs. Right. He honestly should have seen this coming, all things considered. This can only mean bad news, and Theseus dreads to think what 'bad news' could mean. Dream's gonna kill him for causing all that destruction.

Maybe literally.

"Well, well, well, look who's finally awake!"

Speak of the goddamned devil.

"Sorry," Theseus says, and then he frowns. It had been instinctual. The first thing he says after waking up is an apology, even though Dream had hurt him first. Granted, he's fairly certain he'd shorted out a majority of the facility, which means that the lightning and the invisibility and the abnormal strength hadn't just been his imagination, which is an entirely new thing for him to unpack, whoop-de-fucking-doo. Theseus cranes his neck to look over at Dream, who seems to be oddly nonchalant in his own stupid chair. "Where...?"

"Your new room," Dream answers. Theseus looks around. This

room is even more bare-bones than the other one, with just a cot in the corner and metal walls that are probably reinforced, though thankfully, there's still an off-room bathroom. Dream tilts his head. His eyes are steely and cold. "You sure did work yourself up there, didn't you?"

"Please take these off," Theseus says. The metal is starting to press uncomfortably into his skin now that he's not unconscious, and he winces. *If you were being properly fed, you'd probably be strong enough to break out of here.* Theseus snaps his eyes up to Dream. "Take them off."

He's not asking nicely anymore. Dream doesn't deserve that.

Dream chuckles darkly. "Somebody sure thinks he's not in massive trouble," he says, tone light with something murderous underneath. Theseus keeps the eye contact though, refusing to waver or turn away. He's *brave*, dammit, and he's not going to let Dream keep doing this to him. It doesn't seem like Dream gets the message, though, because his eyes just crinkle up at the corners. "Jeez, you really are determined, aren't you? I'm shaking in my boots, honestly."

Lightning crackles at Theseus's fingertips. "Let me out," he says through gritted teeth, and Dream's eyes are the first to dart away from their little staring contest, worriedly flicking back and forth between Theseus's hands and presumably where the door is. Theseus thrashes as much as he can, even if he knows it's pointless, straining against the metal. His chest heaves with angry breaths. "Take them *off*."

"You're acting out," Dream says, all fake sympathy, and the electricity at Theseus's fingertips crackles dangerously as his skin pops in and out of view. Dream kicks at the base of the chair, and Theseus tries to keep himself visible. He's not trying to *hide*, his mind just thinks that he's in danger, which he probably is. Dream crosses his arms. "I had to stop everything just to keep your little fit under control, y'know. You really should apologize."

"I already did," Theseus grits out. The blue lightning jumps up his arms. "Let me go."

"What, so you can cause another scene? I don't think that's the best idea," Dream tells him, and Theseus's jaw clenches. Dream leans forward and kicks the bottom of the chair again. "You're such a pain sometimes, d'you know that? You're lucky I'm around, otherwise—"

"You're a liar," Theseus snarls. *Whose name begins with W? Who likes strawberries? Who owns swords? Who rubs his back to comfort him when he's sad? Who helped him through a panic attack? **What else is Dream hiding from him?*** Theseus thrashes forward again. "Let me go, you piece of shit! Let me go! You're a liar, you're a bitch, I *hate* you—"

The knife to his throat shuts him up *very* quickly.

Dream glares at him. "Watch your mouth," he says, an instruction more than a warning, and Theseus reluctantly stops talking. Are they even brothers? Is Dream lying about that too? Is Theseus even *sick*? A thousand questions are swirling around in his mind, a hurricane of confusion and terror and righteous anger, but Theseus voices none of them. Dream moves the knife away from his throat and sighs. "I really hoped this would be easier. I don't want to have to start all over but I will if I have to."

Theseus swallows. "What does that mean?" he asks, voice barely above a whisper, and Dream just waves a hand dismissively. Theseus watches as Dream flips the knife between his fingers, the metal glinting. The lights are on. *He lied about your eyes. You're not sick.* Theseus flexes his hands in frustration. "What do you want from me?"

The knife stops moving. "I just want my little brother back," Dream tells him. "I worked so *hard* to mold you into my perfect weapon, and now...? Well, now you're back to the way you were before, and while that's incredibly annoying, it also gives me more of a challenge. So I'm torn here, Theseus, I really am."

Wracking his brain, Theseus wonders what the hell Dream *actually* wants from him. He wants a little brother? Theseus can do that. Theseus can be a little brother. *He's been a little brother his whole life, just to someone else. Two someones.* Theseus takes a shuddering breath and looks away. He doesn't want to do this, but

he might have to.

"I can do that," he says quietly. "I can be your little brother."

Dream makes a vague noise of surprise. Theseus resists the urge to scowl. This is humiliating and infuriating, but maybe, *just maybe*, if he plays along, Dream will get lazy. He'll get complacent, and then Theseus can break himself and Puffy out of here. If Dream thinks he's won, his arrogance will be his downfall.

"I'm surprised, Theseus. I thought you'd have a bit more... conviction," Dream says, clearly searching for a crack in the facade, but Theseus won't give him one. He'll keep his cards close to his chest. He's confused and scared and he's definitely been lied to—about fucking everything—but he's *stubborn*. He's stubborn and he's got someone to protect, which is really all he needs to keep himself grounded. Dream plunges the knife into Theseus's bicep. Theseus doesn't flinch. Dream laughs quietly. "Look at that. Not even a blink. I've taught you well."

Theseus feels nauseous. "You have," he agrees anyway, because Dream *has* taught him. He's taught Theseus not to trust him, which is arguably the most valuable lesson Theseus remembers being taught. Theseus's eye twitches minutely as Dream slowly drags the blade back out.

He doesn't want to watch the skin and muscle stitch themselves back up, but Dream yanks him by the hair and forces him to watch anyway. "Watch! Your body won't even let you die anymore," Dream says, horribly fascinated. He plunges the knife into Theseus's chest. Theseus chokes for a moment as blood fills his lungs *so horribly familiar* and Dream yanks it right back out. Theseus feels his lung stitch itself back up, and he coughs up the blood, staining his shirt with red. *So much red*. Dream laughs in delight. "You're invincible! Practically immortal! Of course, if you die of old age, that can't really be helped, not yet at least, but—I made you into the *perfect weapon*, Theseus. I'm a *god*. And, honestly, creations ought to thank their makers, don't you think?"

"You're insane," Theseus croaks, trying not to cry at the increasingly routine taste of blood in his mouth. He's sure it's all over his tongue

and his teeth and the roof of his mouth, and the idea of it makes him want to vomit. “You’re fucking *insane*—”

The knife is at his throat again. Despite the knowledge that Dream will just bring him back-however the *fuck* that works-Theseus instinctively snaps his mouth shut. He doesn’t want to die, hates dying, even though there’s a guarantee that he’ll just come back. “You really shouldn’t piss me off,” Dream tells him, deadly quiet. “You’re lucky I’m entertaining this at all.”

“Right,” Theseus whispers, “I’m sorry.”

The knife is back at Dream’s side. Thank fucking God. “That’s more like it,” Dream says, and Theseus resists the urge to glare at him. Dream crosses his arms. “Let’s discuss a new rule, shall we? You won’t be talking to anyone but me from now on. Not the doctors, and certainly not Puffy.”

“What? No, no, Dream, you can’t-please, I just-I’ll do everything you and the doctors ask me to, just *please* let me talk to Puffy,” Theseus says, because if he can’t talk to Puffy, he might actually go insane. She’s the only one who’s helped him, she feels *familiar*, and he’s a bit afraid that if he only ever talks to Dream, he’ll end up getting manipulated again. Theseus surges forward a little against the restraints. “I won’t ever discuss anything you don’t want me to with her! I-I haven’t tried to remember anything for *ages*! Puffy’s been good too, we’ve both done what you’ve asked, I won’t even talk to the doctors, I-”

“God, you’re so *annoying*,” Dream huffs. “Fine. I’ll have the two of you supervised whenever you want a visit. The last thing I need is another superpowered temper tantrum on my hands. Now, I’m going to leave. Your restraints will be released once the room is sealed up. Cause some shit like that again”-the knife is back at his throat-“and I’ll fucking dissect you.”

“Duly noted,” Theseus says, voice cracking.

Dream steps away, taking his chair with him as he leaves the room. Once the door slides back into place-and Dream wasn’t lying about the fact that the room is *sealed*, there’s the hissing of air pressure to

prove it-the metal restraints around Theseus's limbs slide open, and he falls to his hands and knees to the ground.

The floor is cold. Theseus is certain he's being watched. He stands, slowly and deliberately, and he walks over to the cot in the corner. It's also made of metal. It looks uncomfortable. He wants to go home.

*Where **is** home?*

Home is with...

He crawls underneath the thin blanket covering the cot and shivers. Theseus tries desperately to remember what home is like. All his brain supplies him with is a headache. But he has to *try*, he owes it to... who does he owe it to?

Fuck. He doesn't know.

But Theseus knows he owes it to *someone*, and that's enough.

It'll have to be enough.

Hope you guys enjoyed this chapter :D

Also, I promise I will include art I've gotten since chapter 69 came out in the next chapter, I just really wanted to get something out for y'all to read!!!

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End-of-chapter summary for you squeamish folks: The birthday party Tommy was promised was a bust. After waiting for what felt like days, he was finally told to go to bed and something snapped. He flipped out (understandably so) and got tranq'd. He's fully suspicious of Dream now and while he hardly remembers anything

still, he wants out.



the villain's interlude

Chapter 71: the villain's interlude

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Dream's never been a patient man.

He's never tried to market himself as one, either, so he's honestly a bit confused as to why Eret thinks they can just ramble on for five minutes in his office. This is irritating. He really has to get back to the underground labs to supervise the next experiment. Dream doesn't have time for this, and he tells Eret as much.

"Cut to the chase," he says, and they blink at him with wide eyes. Dream gives a pointed glance down at his watch and crosses his arms. "I have places to be, Eret."

Eret clears their throat and shuffles through a couple of the papers they have gathered in their arms, setting one down on Dream's desk. "This is the last thing, I swear," they say, and Dream looks down at the paper. It's hardly anything important. "I know you said that the project was closed, but I just wanted to double check, only because Hannah and I had a talk yesterday-"

"I've told you, time and time again, I'm not bringing you on the project. I get it, you've got a thing for genetic engineering, but I can't," Dream says, ensuring that he sounds firm, but not as unkind as he'd like to be, and judging by the look on Eret's face, his calculated tone does the job well enough. Dream folds his hands on his desk. "There's a bias risk, and I'm not going to jeopardize the science because you didn't get the promotion you wanted."

Eret's shoulders fall a bit at that. Hm. Maybe Dream had been a bit harsher than strictly necessary. But it doesn't seem to impact their impression of him *too* much, given that they still nod and smile, so at

least he doesn't have to waste any more time with an apology he definitely won't mean.

"Right, yeah, of course, I'm sorry again about interrupting, I'll, uh... I'll get out of your hair," they say, ducking out of the room, and Dream stretches his arms out in front of him, cracking his knuckles.

Now he's *definitely* got no time to waste. He's got a multitude of things planned for today, and he really has to get down to the underground facility. Dream moves out of his office, locking the door behind him, and George quickly falls in stride with him as the two of them walk down the hall together.

George is... interesting. Dream admits that he'd initially been hesitant when Sapnap had introduced the two of them, but George has proven to be exceptionally loyal. Moreso than Sapnap, who's evidently betrayed him for Quackity and one of his staff. Dream isn't *stupid*, obviously he knows that Sapnap's a double agent-the guy can't hide anything from the people he foolishly cares about, after all-but it's not too much of a hindrance, so it's fairly low on his list of priorities.

George, on the other hand, has done everything Dream has asked of him and then some. He appreciates George's discretion and distance from the whole Quackity mess; things would be a whole lot harder for Dream if George and Sapnap were still as close as they once were. Fortunately for George, he's chosen the right side, and Dream's made sure he knows it.

"Have they started today's experiment?" Dream asks, and George taps on his tablet, pushing up his sunglasses.

"No, but they're asking for you," George says, sounding rather bored as he taps away, and Dream gives a couple of workers a wave as they pass by. George hums, and his brows raise a bit when Dream glances over at him inquisitively. "Actually, scratch that. We'll have to put it off until later. Schlatt's booked a meeting with you for this afternoon."

Dream scrunches his nose up in distaste. "Can't *you* deal with him?" he asks, and George gives him a long-suffering sigh.

"Believe me, I've tried, but he wants to speak with you directly," George says, a bit wary, and Dream resists the urge to slam his fist into the wall. Schlatt *really* doesn't need to be bothering him right now. George hums. "That reminds me, we have a bit of a situation."

Halting in the middle of the hallway-George following the movement quickly after-Dream gives him a murderous look. It's not necessarily murderous intent *towards* George, but George knows that by now. "What *kind* of situation?" Dream asks, and George glances around the hall to make sure no one else is around before turning the tablet toward Dream. Dream squints. "What the hell am I looking at? That's just Spider-Man."

"Exactly," George says, "but it's Spider-Man from *yesterday*. The mask is cropping up again, and public opinion is starting to sway back in Spider-Man's favor."

Dream rolls his eyes. "In what world do I give two fucks about public opinion?" he asks, turning back towards the lifts, and George follows.

"I could do without the snark," George tells him, "but the reason I'm telling you this is that the protestors have started up again. It's not looking good for Schlatt's re-election-it's probably what he wants to talk to you about, actually-which means that we'll be in deep shit if we want to keep political control."

It's a pain, but George is right. "Fine," Dream says, "I'll meet up with Schlatt and entertain whatever shitfit he's having over this. Keep tabs on whoever's acting as Spider-Man, but don't put too much stock in it. It's probably just one of Tommy's friends doing something stupid."

Dream knows *exactly* who it is, and he honestly finds it kind of funny. He hopes the kid gets hurt enough to keep him out of the way. Maybe dead, if luck is on Dream's side.

"I'm on it," George tells him, and the two of them get into the elevator. The music is quiet. For a moment, neither of them say anything, and then George is tap-tap-tapping away again at his tablet. "The company's other projects are going smoothly. We're

having a bit of trouble with the-

"Prying eyes, my friend," Dream tells him, eyes flitting to the security camera in the corner. He's sure that the CCTV in the upper levels of the building, all without any audio, are being monitored by the kid, and while he's certain the information displayed on George's tablet would go unnoticed amongst everything else, he's not about to take that chance with any information. "You know better, George, c'mon."

George hums beside him, unamused. "Yeah, well, when else am I going to get the chance to talk to you about this stuff? You're hardly ever in your office anymore," he says, and Dream feels the familiar sense of impatience and irritation swirling in his gut. And for whatever reason, George feels the need to keep talking. "If you weren't so busy playing family in the basement, maybe we'd actually get some goddamn work done-

Dream grabs him by the collar and slams him against the elevator wall. George makes a stilted, choked sort of sound and winces. "If you weren't the most loyal motherfucker I know, I'd have killed you by now. You know that, don't you? You know your loyalty means *everything* when it comes to the value of your life, right?" Dream asks, tilting his head. George swallows audibly-probably because Dream's knuckles are pressing into his neck-and nods. Dream drops his hold and returns back to a practiced, poised stance, hands behind his back. "Insult my family again and I'll kill you in spite of it."

Rubbing at his throat as he stands to Dream's side, just slightly behind him, George takes a shaky breath. "Understood," he says, and honestly, Dream has to stop himself from rolling his eyes. George shouldn't get so shaken up like this over something as trivial as being tossed around a little. As they draw ever-nearer to the first floor, George straightens his tie. "You know, you could really do with being a little nicer to me. I'm the only person left that would still stick by you with no blackmailing involved."

The dark, murderous anger in Dream's sternum sits behind his lungs and pulses as he smiles wryly. "If you think I care whether the people in my life are sticking around by choice, you *really* must not know me as well as I thought you did," he says, and George scowls. Dream lets out a harsh bark of a laugh-enough to make George

wince instinctively, given it's the laugh he'd usually reserve for Tommy, but not enough to really scare him. "Besides, what the hell are *you* going to do? Turn me in? Turn *yourself* in as a domestic terrorist who aided in the kidnapping of a child superhero?"

George stiffens. "The poison was *your* idea-

"My point still stands," Dream says, steamrolling over George's unnecessary and frankly irritating protests, and George's jaw sets. He *should* probably play nice, though. George is an invaluable asset, after all. Dream puts a hand gingerly on George's shoulder. "I'm just... there's a lot going on right now, alright? The last thing I need is you badgering me on top of everything else. What happened to being my friend?"

"'Being your friend' comes with responsibilities I didn't ask for," George grumbles, "but I get your point. I'll take care of everything on the experimental front that doesn't involve the... subject in question, and you can do whatever it is you need to do. I've got your back. Just like I always do. No questions asked."

Dream makes his eyes crinkle up at the corners, and George's shoulders relax under his grip at that. It's such an easy tactic to get people to lower their guard, and Dream's always just a little surprised every time George falls victim to it. "You're the best friend I could've ever asked for," he says, because it never fails to keep George entangled in the web of Dream's plans, and George gives him a slight smile. Dream remembers something-a phrase from hours and hours' worth of surveillance-and he makes his voice something softer, kinder. "It's you and me against the world, George."

George's half-smile wipes off of his face completely. Shit. Dream should've known he'd pick up on where he got it from. "Don't try that shit with me," George mutters darkly. "I know where you heard that, and I'm telling you now, don't repeat it. That's fucked up, man. Even for you."

He'll just have to try a different tactic later. "You're right," Dream relents, because it's easier and more productive than just threatening George again, "I'm sorry."

"You better be," George says, though there's some hint of a joke in it, and Dream makes his eyes crinkle up again. George nods to the elevator doors as they pop open. "C'mon, you've got a meeting to get to."

"Mayor Schlatt, great to see you as always," Dream lies easily, offering a hand out to London's mayor, who shakes it with a slight hesitation. He makes himself at home in the seat across from Schlatt, partially because he wants to seem at ease in spite of his frustration and partially because he wants to see Schlatt squirm. Dream crosses an ankle over his knee and folds his hands in his lap. "So... to what do I owe the pleasure?"

Schlatt nods at his two security guards, who promptly step out of the room. Dream resists the urge to laugh; what a fucking idiot. "You told me the Spider-Man issue was done with," he says, brows furrowed. "Now, we've still got that kid running around, my public approval is in the shitter, and you're *still* being a pain in my ass about disbanding pro-Spider-Man protests."

Feigning confusion, Dream tilts his head. After a calculated moment in which Schlatt's face twists like he's trying not to react to biting into a lemon, Dream blinks. "Oh, I was waiting for you to bring up something that wasn't you just being bad at the one job you've got," he says, keeping his tone light but dangerous, and Schlatt's eye twitches.

"Look, asshole, I did what you asked, okay? I gave orders I didn't want to give, I've tried to skew public opinion against the kid, I did *everything* you told me to," Schlatt snaps, and Dream just watches him. They all inevitably crack at his lack of reaction, and he's watching Schlatt's foundation shatter in real time. "I don't even hate the kid! Matter of fact, he's got his priorities in order! He does good work! Which is exactly why I can't do the shit you want me to, dickhead! No sane person is gonna favor a politician over a vigilante that's actively helping the community."

"So what are you saying?" Dream asks, a bit curious.

"I'm saying I'm *done*," Schlatt tells him. "I'm done doing your fuckin' bidding, alright?! I don't want anything to do with this shit anymore! Leave me out of it, let me do my thing as mayor, and just-take the security shit you want, I could give less of a fuck about the CCTV, but at least have the good sense to fuck off, would you?!"

Dream laughs. Then he sees that Schlatt's being serious. "You're not done doing anything," he says, crossing his arms. "You *really* think I'm not above leaking your documentation to the press? You think you'll be able to worm your way out of criminal charges? I fucking *own* you, man. Everything you have can be taken away with just a snap of my fingers. And I'm certainly not gonna let you sit there telling *me* what's going to happen, because all of the power? It's in *my* hands. Every second you sit behind that desk, every breath you take-it's because *I* let it happen, got that?"

Jaw set in foolish determination, Schlatt glares at him. This, Dream thinks, is easily the dumbest thing Schlatt's ever done. There are so many other things worth arguing over-hell, Dream would even entertain the notion of changing his mind if it were something worthy of it-but this certainly isn't one. "So you're blackmailing me?" Schlatt asks, and Dream scoffs out a half-laugh, though there's no humor in it. "That's what this is?"

"Schlatt, my friend, that's all this has *ever* been," Dream tells him, plain and simple. He can't recall a time when Schlatt hasn't owed him something, and he's fairly certain that Schlatt wouldn't be able to either. Dream puts his hands out placatingly, though, because he finds that people will go against their own best interests when driven to a high level of anger, and he doesn't need Schlatt to go and do something stupid that ruins this arrangement for the both of them. "Let's reach a compromise here. You wanna get re-elected? I'll give you that. After today's protest, you can lay off the anti-Spider-Man stuff for a while. At least until this whole 'comeback' business dies down. Does that work for you?"

The question's a mere formality, and Schlatt certainly knows that. Dream's not *asking*, he's *instructing*. For a moment, though, Dream *swears* he sees a glimpse of that same defiance from before crossing Schlatt's face. "Fine. Fine! I'll do that," he relents, and Dream has to stop himself from laughing. Schlatt's still glaring at

him, though, which is annoying. “Are you done? Or are you gonna keep doing this bullshit? When’s the next time I have to throw my reputation out for you, huh? Haven’t I done enough?”

Dream stands and places a hand on the desk between them, leaning forward, towering over Schlatt. “You’re done when I say you’re done. You wanted to be mayor, I got you in the chair. I ask for *very* little, all things considered,” he says, keeping his tone low and warning, and Schlatt reaches up with a slightly-almost imperceptibly-shaky hand to fix his collar. Dream narrows his eyes. “After everything I’ve done for you, after all the *power* I’ve given you, you still have the audacity to demand more. You’re the one in debt here, Schlatt, not me. You’d do well to remember that.”

And with that warning, Dream turns heel and strides out of the office, chin up high. He’s not going to waste his time sitting here and arguing circles around Schlatt. He’s got higher priorities, other things to focus on. He gives a quick nod to both of Schlatt’s bodyguards and steps into the reception room. George is waiting there, of course, and he hardly misses a beat before he’s falling back into step with Dream as they walk out of the building.

“Everything squared away?” George asks, and Dream nods, clambering into the passenger’s seat of the car as George gets behind the wheel. George flexes his hands around the wheel, a nervous habit of his, and Dream narrows his eyes. George clears his throat. “I was, uh, looking at our supply of the gas, like you asked me to, and we don’t... have any left.”

Dream swears under his breath. That gas is a pain in his ass to make, even if it *is* worth it. He’s only ever had to use it twice-once, to test how breakable Spider-Man’s psyche is, and the second time as a last resort. The process of making it is agonizing, given that the formula needs an unreasonable amount of his blood to work.

The spider he’d been bitten by hadn’t worked the way he’d intended. That much is clear, given his near-lack of a jaw, but at least he’d still gained *something* from it. It just really sucks that it’s limited to what flows in his veins. Not to mention, all of that regeneration and strength he’d hoped for hadn’t appeared, no matter what he’d tried in order to bring it out.

He'll settle for being the main ingredient in hallucinogenic gas, though.

"We'll just have to make some more," he says dismissively. George's brows remain furrowed, but he nods and keeps driving nonetheless. Dream lets the silence sit between them for a moment, just long enough for George to flit his eyes over nervously, and he sits back, making his posture intentionally relaxed. "Did you hear anything about the new round of blood testing?"

Tommy's been in a bit of a rebellious streak lately, which is a great annoyance. While Dream had initially been thrilled about seeing Tommy's psyche snap so majorly, it seems that he's got his stubbornness *back* rather than being rid of it completely. This, along with the fact that he clearly remembers enough to doubt Dream's careful manipulation, is pretty tedious to deal with. At least it seems that he's willing to listen, which means Dream doesn't have to start over.

But the past couple of days have been hell on earth in terms of trying to get Tommy to do much of anything. Not only is Dream bleeding money in order to fix all the shit that Tommy broke in his little temper tantrum, but he's dealing with an uncooperative test subject on top of all of it. It isn't as though he *can't* threaten Tommy- he can still do that pretty effectively as long as he brings up Puffy, after all-but he finds himself evenly matched in that department.

If Tommy doesn't eat, he could starve, which would be *bad*. Dream's revival device can restart organs, but he's not sure if it could fix the lasting damage done by dehydration or starvation. He's not about to test that, not yet at least, and while he can force an IV to stave away dehydration, there's very little he can do to keep Tommy from starving if he's decided not to eat.

Sure, he can threaten to harm Puffy or threaten to take away Tommy's visits with her, but Tommy can shoot threats of not eating right back at him, which leaves them at a stand-still. It's irritating to have to negotiate with someone who *should* be completely under his control by now, but Dream finds himself excited to finally have some pushback. The challenge of it is thrilling in and of itself, and it's more like the Tommy he's familiar with-the Tommy he's grown used to,

grown fond of as a little brother.

But at the same time, Dream has to play nice. He has to pretend to ask permission to do frivolous things like have the doctors take blood samples. It seems like that's all Tommy has set the bar for, though, which is easy for now.

George hums, snapping him from his thoughts. "He was actually pretty cooperative today, all things considered," he says, and Dream's pleasantly surprised to hear it. George laughs a bit to himself, and Dream gives him a questioning look. "Sorry, sorry, I was just-I still don't really get why you're so attached to the kid. He's a pain in your ass, isn't he?"

"He is, but he's my little brother, so I've decided to deal with it for as long as it takes to quell that behavior," Dream says easily, and George raises a brow but says nothing more. Disquieted by the line of questioning, Dream glances down at his watch, giving the enderwalk application a couple of taps. "Oh, it's just about time to bring our little spy in."

Pulling to the front of the building, George gives him a nod. "I'll have him sent to you right away once he gets here," he says, and Dream throws an appreciative look his way as he gets out of the car and starts to head back to the underground laboratories.

The enderwalk prototype isn't perfected yet, but it's good enough for getting information on what the Watsons have planned. Unfortunately, the kid's been *really* elusive lately, so Dream hasn't gotten much. Hopefully, though, timing it in the midst of a pro-Spider-Man protest will give them enough leeway to get the kid over here.

Dream takes the elevator down, navigates his way through the maze of corridors, and stands in the viewing bay, watching Tommy move around his room on a dozen cameras. He's currently punching and kicking aimlessly at the walls, trying to dent the specialized steel. It's made specifically to withstand Tommy's strength, so his efforts don't do much.

Admittedly, it's a little troubling to see Tommy so desperate to

escape, especially after all that Dream's done for him, but Dream waves away the slight concern in favor of scanning over the vital monitor results from earlier this morning. With each new spider bite, Tommy's muscle composition has gotten stronger and stronger, which Dream is cautiously optimistic about. If provided with the proper nutrition and energy, Tommy would probably be strong enough to capsize a goddamned warship, but given that he's constantly teetering on the edge of starvation, Dream doesn't have to worry all that much about that. Additionally, Tommy's regeneration abilities and metabolism have both sped up exponentially, which is both great and horrible. The team doesn't really have quite a handle on the exact specifications in regards to caloric intake needed in order to sufficiently keep Tommy from starving while simultaneously keeping him weak.

Tommy's heartbeat and blood pressure have also both lowered to the point where it would likely be fatal for a normal human if occurring for an extended period of time, but it seems to be just fine for Tommy. Dream doesn't really have a way to test Tommy's sixth sense-he still doesn't know just what to call the abnormal, incredible reaction time and reflexes-due to the fact that Tommy's been trained into taking injury without trying to get away from it or even flinching. It's something to consider for later down the line, though.

"Let me out," Tommy groans, fists thumping half-heartedly on one of the walls. He looks positively awful, but Dream feels nothing at the sight of his too-loose clothes, his bony frame, his sunken-in cheeks. Well, not *nothing*, he does feel a bit of annoyance. Tommy should really stop denying what little food he's offered. Dream watches as on the screen, Tommy slumps down to the ground, chest heaving with the effort to take in breath. *"I wanna go home..."*

Dream mutes the speakers. Such an annoyance.

The door slides open, and he swivels in his chair, eyes crinkling up at the corners as Ranboo walks in, his eyes a glassy purple. "I was starting to wonder when we'd be able to isolate you from all your little protest friends," Dream says, and Ranboo blinks, face completely blank. As Dream walks up, there's still no reaction. Ah, right, he should give the kid a command first and foremost. "Tell me what the Watsons have planned."

"I haven't been told any details of the plan," Ranboo says, his voice the trademark monotone that the enderwalk program brings with it.

Dream's eye twitches. "Alright, that's fine, that's... I can't imagine why they haven't told you anything," he mutters, starting to pace. "This is obviously another irritating obstacle, but it's not going to throw us off-I won't let it. I'll just have the usual precautions set up. I need you to find out when they're putting their plan into action, even if you don't know exactly what their plan is."

He directs that last statement at Ranboo, whose irises spin around his pupils like a buffering symbol. "I've been keeping myself away from them purposefully. I seem to recall waking up with missing chunks of time," he reports, and Dream swears under his breath.

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me," he mutters. As he turns to say something more, George clears his throat from the doorway. Dream resists the urge to stab someone. "What? What the fuck do you want?"

"I think this one," George says, jerking his thumb in Ranboo's direction, "was tailed."

Fuck.

George strides over to the array of monitors and switches one of the feeds to the camera right outside the front doors. There's a kid there-clearly Tommy and Ranboo's age-and he's just sort of looking around with his hands in his pockets. Dream's eyes narrow. Another annoyance.

"Ranboo. Tell me who this is," he orders, pointing to the image of the kid, and Ranboo robotically walks over, irises spinning again as he looks at the screen.

"That's Purpled. He's a classmate and friend of mine and Tommy's," he says, and the name sounds vaguely familiar to Dream. "His house was the one the party was held at."

And there it is. "Right. Send security to get rid of him," Dream tells George, who nods and taps his earpiece and starts to relay the

order quietly. "Say something about loitering or whatever, I don't care."

He keeps an eye on the screen and unmutes the speakers as one of the building's security guards walks up to the kid and starts to tell him to leave. "*My friend went in there, I'm just waiting for him to come back out,*" he says in response, and the security guard crosses his arms. The kid makes a big show of rolling his eyes. "*It won't be more than, like, five minutes, dude, I swear. Look, I'll call him right now.*"

Oh. That's clever.

Ranboo's phone starts to buzz in his pocket. "Ignore it," Dream snaps, and Ranboo does just that, remaining unmoving as the phone keeps buzzing, finally coming to an end. Dream watches as the security guard on the screen gestures for Purpled to leave, which he does, if only after another moment of hesitation. Dream glances over at Ranboo and sighs. "You really don't know anything, huh?"

"I don't," Ranboo confirms. His stupid, slack facial expression is pissing Dream off.

George steps forward again. "You could send him to their house—"

"That little shit already knows something's off, and we're already running out of time to talk to him before his other friends notice he's gone as it is, are you stupid?! And besides, watching them through his eyes takes *time* and *focus*! Both of which are things that I *do not have*!" Dream snaps, and George blinks. Ranboo's phone starts buzzing again, and Dream punches the wall. "Fuck it all! Go back to your protest, you useless piece of shit!"

Ranboo turns and walks directly out the door. Dream swears under his breath and waits until he can see Ranboo leave the building on the security cameras, swiping up twice on his watch to release the hold of the enderwalk program. George lingers in the room, for whatever fucking reason, and Dream doesn't so much as spare him a glance as he switches the camera feed back to another one of the cameras in Tommy's room.

There's a knock on the door yet again, and Dream's *really* starting to get pissed off now. "Dream, I was hoping I could talk to you, if you have a minute," Ponk's voice says from over by the doorway, and Dream's grip on the console tightens.

"No, no, by all means," Dream says, voice dripping with sarcasm, "it's not as if a million people have been bothering me all damn day, asking an ungodly amount of questions and demanding even more meetings, go ahead! Ask away!"

He looks over to Ponk, who shrinks into himself a bit, brows furrowed in either indignation or worry, both of which are just as infuriating. "I want to know if Sam's okay, that's all," Ponk says, and Dream's eye twitches.

"I've told you, time and time again, that as long as you hold up your end of the bargain, nothing happens to Sam," Dream grits out, and Ponk still looks at him, that annoying defiance still in his eyes. Dream scoffs. "Seriously, Ponk, I don't have time for this shit. Sam is alive and well, and as long as you shut up and do your job, he'll *stay* that way. Now get the fuck out of my sight before I change my mind."

Ponk hesitates-it seems like he wants to say something more-but he has the good sense to turn heel and walk down the hall. George comes to Dream's side and places a hand on his shoulder in what's a clear attempt at comfort that only serves to irritate Dream further. "Is there anything you need?" George asks. "Your day's been stressful enough, if you want me to take care of stuff for you, I will."

George is good. He's useful. And right now, Dream doesn't find himself nearly as snappish with George as he is towards just about everyone else. But before he can give George an order, Tommy's voice starts to crackle over the speakers again. "*I want to see Mum,*" he says, quiet enough to sound defeated. "*I won't keep trying to get out if you take me to her.*"

Dream scrubs a hand over his face. "Just-take Tommy to Puffy and supervise them to make sure they're not trying to pull some bullshit," he says. "Kill the kid to get him to cooperate if you need to, I'll have my phone on in case you need to call to have him revived."

A bit pale, George nods. "I'm on it," he says. "Anything else?"

"I'll need you to squash the imposter spider in a day or two," Dream tells him, "but that's it for now."

He's got work to do.

End-of-chapter summary: Dream talks to a whole lotta people about a whole lotta things, Ranboo's there for a bit, and I am on my fourth cup of coffee of the night.

Hope you all enjoyed this chapter!! A bit of a departure from our usual cast of POVs, lol

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MM

Chapter 72: MM

Freedom is so close, Theseus can almost taste it.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Theseus looks down at his hands.

Into existence. Prominent veins, pale hands. *Out of existence.* The cold tile floor. *I want to be here.* Hands. *I don't want to be here.* Floor. Rinse and repeat, over and over until-

"Theseus. Stop it," George's voice barks from the speakers. Theseus sticks his middle fingers up and makes himself visible. *"Very mature. Do you want dinner or not?"*

Theseus's stomach growls. "Go fuck yourself," he says instead of accepting the offer, because it's not as if George will let him starve. He walks over to the restraint chair and sits down, making a face as the metal snaps into place, and the door slides open. George leaves the tray of food on the floor and turns to leave, but Theseus clears his throat. "Hey. Got a question for you."

George turns to look at him, expression indiscernible behind his sunglasses. "Can't promise an answer," he says, "but go ahead."

The restraints press into Theseus's skin as he leans forward a bit, eyes narrowed. "Why do you do all this, huh? It's not like you're getting anything worth it out of torturing me," he says, and George tilts his head. Theseus leans forward even further. The restraints dig so hard into his skin that he's sure he'll come away with injuries, but it doesn't matter. They'll just heal up the second he moves back

anyway. "What do I look like, George? Is the emaciation not enough? How many *scars* do I have, George?"

George just keeps looking at him, eyes still hidden. "You look like the experiment I've been tasked with keeping alive. Not *well*, but alive. And I've done my job," he says, like it's the most simple thing in the world. Theseus hates him. Theseus hasn't hated anyone in a while-it's something he feels in his gut, stewing there, ugly and angry. George steps forward and nudges the tray closer to Theseus with his foot, almost as if Theseus is a rabid animal that he's scared will bite. "Have some food, Theseus. You never know when you'll get your next meal."

"Yeah," Theseus agrees with vitriol, "I never do."

Rapping his knuckles on the doorway once as he leaves, George shuts the door behind him, and Theseus stumbles out of the chair, the weird instinct at the back of his mind kicking in just in time for him to catch himself before he crashes into the tray of food. He might as well play along, especially considering he needs what little strength he can get today. If he behaves himself-that is to say, if he behaves the way Dream wants him to-then he'll get to see Puffy. If he gets to see Puffy, then he can get some answers.

The food today is a bowl of soup and some bread. It's not the good kind of soup either, it's just slightly watery tomato soup. There's no real protein, it looks completely unappetizing, and yet Theseus's mouth is already starting to water. God, he's *so fucking hungry*. But he tries to eat as slowly as possible in spite of it; he's keeping his cards close to his chest, and he can't risk letting any more of his weakness slip.

It's acidic and sweet.

Theseus nearly vomits.

Every bone in his body protests with a tremendous ache as he stands and tries to stretch. He's been pent up in this fucking room for so long, and there's some muscle memory there, something just under the surface. *Running over rooftops, feet pounding against concrete, whooping as wind rushes past, someone's chipper voice*

in his ear-

Theseus doesn't try to stop the flashes of memory as they come. He doesn't want to shy away from them anymore, isn't as terrified of what will happen if Dream finds out he remembers. Or, actually, he *is* still pretty terrified at the thought of Dream finding out, but he has no problem lying to him now. Any sense of obligation towards Dream has been completely obliterated.

Who's the W?

Theseus tries his hardest to remember.

The stench of cigarettes underlying the scent of coffee. The strum of a guitar. Quietly keeping each other company. Screaming matches over stupid bullshit. Getting along. Bickering to no end. Love-unconditional, freely given. Annoyance-fond and brotherly. The feeling of the sun on his face and laughter next to him. A quiet night with a hand pointing up at the stars. Constellations and voice memo recordings.

Theseus rubs at his eyes and flexes his hands in front of him as he sits down on the cold, uncomfortable cot in the corner of the room. He can't remember a name, can't remember who it is, but he can almost picture a face. It's fragmented, as if he's seeing the person through the jagged glass of a broken mirror. Warm eyes, crooked smile, brown curls. *Glasses, round with metal frames. A jumper, warm-toned and soft-looking.* Something new.

Something new, and that's enough.

Trying his best to sit up properly, even as his muscles strain with the effort, Theseus swallows and looks out at the empty room. Being without sight for a significant amount of time had *really* fucked him up initially; adjusting his eyes to such bright, fluorescent light had been difficult, but he can manage now. He wonders how he hasn't gone insane, what with the fact that there's not even a window to look out of, just walls upon walls.

It's okay, because he has things to hold on to. He has some memories now, ones that feel like enough to make him push

forward. Theseus is so *tired*, though. He's beyond tired. He's fighting against a foe with near-total control over what he does, and he's weaker than he's ever felt in his entire life. Without being able to go anywhere, he can't trigger any more memories, not in the earth-shattering way the cigarette smoke had. He's in pain almost constantly, and while he's forced Dream to have to ask before sticking him with an ungodly amount of needles, that doesn't make them any less painful.

Theseus takes a breath so deep it makes his ribcage shudder with the effort, and he wonders how long it's been since he's finished his food. Surely it's been long enough that he can ask to see Puffy, right? He looks up at the ceiling and tries to will that electricity forth. A feeble spark dances around his fingertips. It's exhausting.

"*Theseus. Stop that,*" George's voice says over the intercom.

"Take me to see Puffy," Theseus says in response, continuing his attempts to bring the lightning forward. Nothing works.

His wrists itch uncomfortably, and he swallows nervously around the lump in his throat as he looks down at the little raised bumps there. He's never tried *that* out-partially because all he associates it with is the giant needles that the doctors stick into him to siphon whatever it is out-but he *could*.

He tries to remember what movement brings the *something* forward, really tries to wrack his brain. Maybe something like... a fist? He closes his hand in a fist and flips his hand upside-down so that his wrist is facing up. No, no, that's not it. It could be something with his thumb? No, sticking his thumb out doesn't do anything either.

Theseus takes a deep breath and shuts his eyes, thinking of rooftops and that voice in his ear again. *Wind blowing past. A white hoodie with something heavy embedded into the chest. The pattern of a spider's web embroidered painstakingly by hand at the very beginning. A sense of duty and too much responsibility to bear. But with great power-*

Thwip!

Theseus's eyes snap open, and there's a splattered, shaky web on the wall directly across from his hand, his middle and ring finger pressed to the base of his palm. That instinct at the back of his mind purrs in delight, as if one of its purposes has been fulfilled, and Theseus feels something warm bloom in his chest. Hands shaking-not with apprehension but with excitement-Theseus flicks both of his wrists out, and a laugh bubbles out of him as two more webs thwip out and stick to the wall across from him.

This is the most joy he's felt in days.

This feels *familiar*.

This feels *empowering*.

Theseus laughs again and thwips some more webs out, watching as the patterns of them get less messy, less unsure, and start to regain some structure. He shoots some at the ceiling, watching the delicate strings form intricate, straight-laced lines, and he positively marvels at them, sure that his face is the picture of wonderment.

He *made* something. Not just *something*, but something beautiful and fragile and so complex that he can't hope to understand how his body just *knows* how to do it. The instinct at the back of his mind chirps-that's new-and Theseus scrambles to stand atop the cot and brush his fingers against the webs on the ceiling. He traces the lines of the web, careful not to disturb it too much. He *made* this. It's *his*, and he can make *more*.

Dream can't take this away from him.

"*Theseus, stop that*," George's voice says again from the overhead speakers, and Theseus ignores him. The webbing is soft, softer than he'd expected it to be, and Theseus wonders if he could make a pillow out of them. It'd surely be more comfortable than laying on the metal cot. "*That's enough, Theseus.*"

"Take me to see Puffy and I'll stop," Theseus bargains, already firing webs down at his cot in a pile, and there's half of a sigh over the speakers before it cuts off. "I'll cover the whole room in these, and then what? What are you gonna do about it, huh?"

As he clammers down from the cot and starts to lay down to test his new pillow out, there's a crackle from the intercom. *"Alright, fine. Sit in your chair and I'll bring Puffy to you,"* George says, and Theseus scowls.

"No, bring me to her," he insists. "Otherwise, I won't eat."

There's a long pause then, presumably because he's giving them the run-around, and Theseus grins. Fuck them. He'll just keep using his bargaining chip-they know he's not bluffing, after all-and they'll just have to listen to his seemingly reasonable demands. If he just so happens to have been gathering enough strength to break out at the same time because they're overcompensating for food, well...

That's his business.

"Fine. Sit in the chair," George says over the speakers, and Theseus listens, wincing as the restraints snap back into place. George steps into the room, flanked by a man in a fox mask, whose hands are wrapped around a rather intimidating-looking gun. Theseus swallows nervously as George gives the ceiling a nod, and the restraints around him come apart. George grabs him by the bicep, frowning. "Try anything and he'll load you with bullets. Is that clear?"

"Crystal," Theseus mutters, and George, seemingly satisfied with that answer, starts to lead him down the hall.

It's odd now that Theseus can see it. There's a long stripe of LED light, slowly pulsing between colors and changing completely down other hallways, almost like a directional system. He tries his hardest to commit the colors to memory, especially the ones that George hurries to push him past. *Green is accessible, George doesn't care about those hallways. Blue is less accessible, but he isn't moving past them too fast. Red. Red's where he needs to go.* The walls of the hallways are also lined with rubber sheets, almost haphazardly, as if it's a recent development. Theseus is fairly certain he knows why that is.

"C'mon, in you go," George mutters, pushing him into a room marked with orange light flowing into yellow light, and Theseus grins at the sight of Puffy, even though he's always worried about her.

Always worried about everyone else, never yourself. George seems as though he's going to step in to join them, but he holds a hand up to his ear and gives a jerking nod to the man in the fox mask. George points at the two of them. "Don't cause me *any* problems. I'll be back."

The door slides shut behind him, the familiar hiss of pressurized air sounding throughout the room. Theseus turns to Puffy, who throws her arms out. He falls into them almost immediately, clutching at the back of her shirt like it's the last hug he'll ever get. They hardly get a chance to hug like this-usually they're told to keep their distance from one another, some bullshit about not 'overwhelming' Theseus-so the two of them really do treasure the few chances they get.

Theseus, wracked with nerves, pulls back enough to press his temple to her hair so that he can whisper to her. The microphones in each of their rooms pick up a *lot*, so he'll have to be careful about staying quiet. "Have you found the cameras in here yet?" he whispers, and he feels her head move in the slightest of nods. Theseus feels apprehension swim in his stomach, and he pulls back from the hug, hands shaking. Puffy's eyes flit to three different spots behind him, and she tilts her head directly back a bit. *Three behind, one in each corner and one right above the door. One ahead, in the middle of the wall.* Theseus gives her a soft smile. "How are you holding up, Mum?"

"I'll be fine," Puffy says, reaching up to ruffle his hair. Her face falls, though, and he takes her hand in both of his, giving it a light squeeze. He's going to save her, *just like he saves everyone, he always saves the day*- "Theseus, are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, I... I'm fine," he tells her, pulling back and rubbing at his arms. "It's cold in here, don't you think?"

Cold temperatures are good for conducting electricity.

"It's definitely a bit chilly," Puffy says. "Do you want me to ask them to turn the temperature up? I don't know if they *will*, but I can always ask."

Are you sure? You can back out if you're not ready.

Theseus waves his hand dismissively. “No, it’s okay, I just... do you think you can grab me a blanket or something?” he asks, eyes flickering over to the bed.

Hide under the bed. Cover yourself.

Puffy’s eyes widen for a fraction of a second, but she nods. “Yes, of course,” she says, “anything you need.”

I trust you.

Theseus smiles.

Puffy pretends to shuffle through the two blankets covering her cot. Her room hasn’t changed like Theseus’s has; it’s still completely padded, all white, soft, and insulated. It might be hard to get all the cameras at once, especially since he’s been having a hard time summoning the lightning back up again, but... they need this. Puffy needs this. Puffy needs *him*.

She looks over her shoulder at him, raising each of the blankets up for him to see. One is thinner and more breathable, and the other is thick and fluffy. A silent question is in her eyes along with an implicit trust, and Theseus feels all of his apprehension melt away. He’ll save her, just as she’s tried to save him. Puffy has tried *so hard* to get him to remember, even as Dream’s been working against both of them. Even if she isn’t really his mother, even if that’s just another one of Dream’s lies, Theseus trusts her and cares for her, and he can *feel* that she’s in his memories, just locked under the surface with the rest of them.

He wills the lightning forward, letting it fill his veins and crackle through his muscles, and he feels all of the hair on his body stand on end. He has someone to protect, someone to save, and that feels *right*. That feels ingrained within him, as if it’s a responsibility he’s always been meant to take on.

Theseus doesn’t know a lot of things. He doesn’t know who his family is. He doesn’t know who his friends are. He doesn’t even know whether the name he carries now is truly his. He can’t remember any of that. But he does know one thing, and it’s that he

is *meant* for this. He's meant to protect those who cannot protect themselves, to save those in need of saving, to help anyone who needs it to the best of his ability.

That's who Theseus is, no matter what name he carries, no matter how many of his memories remain.

"The thicker one's probably better," Theseus tells her, and Puffy nods, slowly setting the thin blanket down on the cot. She looks to him again, and Theseus waits until the lightning is just below his skin, right under his fingertips, right behind his eyes. Clenching his fists, he takes a deep breath. "Now!"

Puffy throws the blanket over herself and rolls under the bed, and Theseus lets the electricity burst out from him, already feeling a bit winded as it shorts out four specific spots in the walls, the electric lock in the door shorting out as the door slides open, and he stumbles, falling to his knees to try and catch his breath.

Puffy hurries to his side, helping him stand. Her hair is raised a bit with static, but she looks otherwise unharmed. "C'mon, kid, c'mon, you're alright, you're okay," she whispers. "I'm not leaving without you, T. You got it, you're fine, you can walk, can't you?"

Theseus nods. The seconds are ticking away, and the two of them don't have time for him to sit around and recuperate. "We don't have much time," he croaks, taking her hand and leading her out of the room and down the hall, back the same way he'd come. *The lights, the lights, follow the lights and remember the colors.* "Wherever the camera feeds are, they're ten minutes from my room. I counted once, I did-Dream said it only took him two minutes and I was being dramatic, but-Puffy, it's ten minutes to my room, and it's five minutes from my room to yours, so we've only got fifteen minutes at most to get out of here, I-I... we have to hurry!"

"Let's go, then," Puffy says. She doesn't let go of his hand, even as he stumbles, and she's pulling in the lead now, stronger and more well-fed than he is. Dream doesn't have to worry about weakening her; she's just a normal person caught up in all of this, and Theseus is a freak of nature. Puffy tugs on his hand as they reach the first green corridor. "C'mon, buddy, this way-"

"No! No, the green hallways-they're not the ones-are they?"

Theseus asks, wracking his shorted-out brain to try and remember what he'd seen on the walk over here. He shakes his head. "No, they're not the ones I get pushed past, they don't care about them, it's... blue? Red? Orange is your room..."

His ears are starting to ring, and he breaks away from her grip to clutch at his head. Shit, he hadn't been as strong as he'd initially thought. Well, either that or using that electric stuff is more taxing than he'd remembered. Puffy's hands are on his shoulders. "Hey! Hey, don't get lost on me, T, you're okay, you're fine. We know it's not green for sure," she says, "and we have time-albeit limited-so you can try to remember while we keep running, okay?"

"Okay," Theseus says, voice breaking, "okay, let's keep running-"

The alarm blares, loud and shrill, cutting him off. Theseus turns with wide eyes to Puffy, whose face fills with fear for a fleeting moment before her expression switches to one of utter determination. "We can do this," she tells him. "We just have to keep running."

"Just keep running," Theseus repeats under his breath, and Puffy offers her hand to him. He takes it and leads her down the white-grey-white corridor until they reach an intersection where the white-grey-white fades into blue. "Is it blue? No, no, it's not blue, blue is more secretive but still accessible, green is easy, orange is you..."

Footsteps start to click rapidly at the far end of the blue hall, and Puffy yanks him along the white-grey-white hallway. "Come on, kid! You can do it, I've got you!" she tells him, and Theseus tries his hardest to remember. *Yellow? No, Puffy is orange-yellow-orange. Purple? No, that's a name-no, a color? Pink is-stains in the bathtub, annoyance, bravery-pink isn't it either.*

The ground thuds beneath Theseus as he struggles to keep pace with Puffy. The two of them book it down the hall, bare feet cold on the tile. The alarm is so *loud*, and Theseus feels his head pound in his skull. Fear fills his lungs as they huff and puff, out of breath as the two of them run faster and faster, past halls and shouts and footsteps. Puffy leads him past hallways upon hallways of the same two colors: blue, green, green, white-grey-white, green, blue, green,

white-grey-white, blue, blue-

“Red!” Theseus shouts, stopping in his tracks. Puffy lurches to a stop, stumbling to catch her footing as he starts down the red hall, watching the light strip in the wall go from white-grey-white to pink to red. Triumph and hope fills his chest as Theseus leads Puffy down the red hallway, looking back at her over his shoulder with a wide smile. “It’s red! This is it!”

There are more shouts from behind them, footsteps pounding from down other halls, but Theseus can’t bring himself to care. He and Puffy are almost out. They’re almost free! A massive set of glass doors are in front of them, and he lets go of her to pull at the handles. Of course, it’s not that easy-they’re locked.

He moves to shoulder through the glass, and Puffy pulls on his arm. “You’re gonna hurt yourself,” she says, voice filled with worry and hope and terror, and Theseus gestures for her to step back.

“I’ll heal,” he says firmly. “Just hang on.”

He takes a few steps back, making a running start for the glass and summoning as much strength as feasibly possible. His shoulder collides with the glass, and there’s a sick crack from both his body and the doors, an array of thin, spindly lines cutting the glass into uneven portions splayed out from the point where he’d struck the door. Theseus swears under his breath. The shouts are getting louder, the footsteps are getting faster, and he’s running out of time.

Ramming at the door again, he manages to deepen the crack further. He keeps shouldering at the door, desperation starting to creep into him as the shouts go from *‘Find them!’* to *‘Down here!’* and the footsteps grow closer and closer. Finally, after the fifth time, the glass in the doors starts to come away in chunks, and Theseus hurries to swipe away at the broken glass so that Puffy can get through without injuring herself, kicking at the remaining jagged bits of the door that are too in-the-way to let them through.

“They’re coming,” Puffy tells him, her voice filled with terror.

“Fuck!” Theseus shouts, kicking the last bits of the door in. His

ankles and his feet are covered in cuts-he's probably got bits of glass stuck in his skin, too, but he doesn't want to think about that right now-and he tears off a chunk of the rubber insulation on the wall to lay it on the floor so that Puffy can walk across safely. If she gets injured now, if her ability to run is impaired, she won't make it out. He helps her across the doorway. The shouts and footsteps are even closer now. Too close. "Go! I'll catch up!"

"I'm not leaving you here!" Puffy says, though the fear in her eyes as she looks over his shoulder tell him all he needs to know about their situation.

Theseus tears down more of the rubber insulation and hands it to her. "Run as far as you can and hide! Cover yourself if it looks like the electricity is getting too close!" he tells her firmly, and she starts to protest. There's the clicking of guns and shoes alike, far too close for his liking. He's terrified. He'd been so *close*. But Puffy still has a chance. He clenches his jaw, ignoring the way his eyes sting at the corners, and he gives her a determined stare. "I'll be fine. Dream only wants one of us alive, and even if I die here, he'll just bring me back. You need to go *now*."

Puffy starts to stumble backwards, insulation clutched with white knuckles. "I'm coming back for you," she promises, "the second I get to the others."

"Go!" Theseus shouts. "You don't have time for this!"

Puffy's eyes well up with tears that probably reflect Theseus's own, and she nods. "I'll see you on the other side," she whispers, barely audible over the alarm, and she runs, disappearing around a corner.

Theseus turns and walks on injured feet towards the source of the sounds down the hall. A truly absurd amount of armed figures are storming towards him, shouting orders at each other, the man in the fox mask leading the charge. Theseus swallows, ignoring the way the glass in his skin digs in further as he makes his stance sturdy, making a face at the way the blood underneath him sticks to the tile.

The electricity under his skin burns and crackles, and he reaches for it, trying to push as much of it forward as he can. Lightning jumps

from his skin to the lights in the walls and in the ceiling, and Theseus watches with sharp eyes as the figures start to slow. He marches towards them, slowly, steadily, and the few at the back with the good sense to retreat begin to run.

This is his last stand. This is for himself, for Puffy, for everyone that's waiting for him on the other side, however many there may be. He's going to make sure she gets out, even if it kills him, because death cannot claim him as long as Dream has him.

Theseus steps forward again, muscles tense, the instinct at the back of his mind screaming in warning at the amount of guns in front of him, at the pure vitriol radiating in waves off of the man in the fox mask. More of the figures retreat, and the man in the fox mask raises his gun.

"You idiots! We need to find the other one! Stop fucking running!" he barks, and Theseus steps forward, electricity crackling at his fingertips, across his arms, in the corners of his eyes where tears have started to fall. The man in the fox mask falters for a moment. "Fuck-!"

Theseus lets go of the lightning, letting the anger and grief and frustration consume him as he shouts with rage, electricity blasting forth from his body in a wave of venom. The unlucky few in the front are blasted backwards, and the electricity bounces from person to person, armed figures falling in waves as Theseus's shout echoes throughout the hall.

Guns clatter to the ground, bodies thud, and Theseus falls to all fours, panting and choking on his tears. He's hardly conscious, only awake from pure adrenaline. He drags himself over to the nearest person-the man with the fox mask-and shakes him. "Hey," he says, voice hoarse and barely audible over the alarm, "wake up..."

The man in the fox mask remains limp, but he seems to be breathing. Theseus looks at the other nearby figures, all the ones that got the brunt of the electricity, and there is no rise and fall to their chests, no hints of life anymore. The ones to the back seem to be stirring, though, which is... something.

Theseus barely has time to process any of it before the adrenaline wears off, and he collapses in the middle of a heap of bodies.

End of chapter summary: WOOHOO, PUFFY'S OUT!!!! LET'S
GOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! It was fun as hell to write :D

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the gang's all here...almost

Chapter 73: the gang's all here... almost

Tubbo finally gets a spore sample, and Puffy is free.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Tubbo is having a *bad* day.

He's supposed to be stage-fighting Quackity today in an attempt to draw out 404 so that they can get a spore sample, because even charging in right now to save Tommy can be instantly thwarted if they're not prepared for that mushroom bullshit and they're stuck waiting until then, but, evidently, George has decided to get the jump on him, for whatever reason. In any case, the dust kicked up by the property damage they're causing by fighting in this stupid shop is definitely not helping anything.

Tubbo coughs into his elbow, squinting in an attempt to see through the cloudy rubble. He can't see George-he can see a silhouette or two, but there's no guaranteeing that they aren't just a display or rack of tchotchkes-so he discreetly sends out Shroud on his behalf, watching the feed in the corner of his eye discreetly as Shroud's thermal imaging camera scans the area. Sure enough, there's a bright red blob of body heat just a few feet away, wildly turning back and forth.

"Gotcha," Tubbo mutters, flicking out a wrist and yanking the massive spore gun out of George's hands with a synthetic web. Now all that stands between him and rescuing Tommy is a sample of the updated spores.

He dives forward, clamping his gas mask over his nose and holding

his breath as a precaution, punching through the glass canister of the spore gun. Wincing as his knuckles sting with an array of cuts from the broken glass, Tubbo grabs a vial from his pocket and swipes it through the slowly-spreading cloud of spores. As he caps it and throws it to Shroud-the drone swipes up the vial and safely tucks it into its abdomen cavity-someone slams into his side, and Tubbo is sent stumbling back into a wall.

George's gas mask is cracked, but Tubbo's fairly certain that the fracture's only in the outer shell of it. Otherwise, he'd be passed out on the ground already, and Tubbo's job would be *so* much easier. Unfortunately for Tubbo, the universe *really* seems to have it out for the good guys these days, and George is still standing.

"Let me just say," George huffs, chest heaving as he catches his breath, "you're just about as pathetic as the 'hero' you're trying to imitate."

Rage and horror floods Tubbo's entire body as his mind scrambles to picture what could possibly be happening to Tommy that would make him seem pathetic. Stepping away from the wall, pieces of the suit peeling away from his scratched-up skin, Tubbo gets into a fighting stance and tilts his head at George.

"Are you gonna fight me, or are you gonna keep running your mouth?" he asks, and George scoffs. Tubbo launches forward, throwing a right hook at George's jaw, and though George dodges, his other fist still connects with George's ribcage, and it gives him an opening to throw another one that hits its original mark. Tubbo gives George a second to get his bearings; he wants to wipe the floor with him, wants to drag the fight out and make it as miserable as possible. "Go on, share your last words with the class."

"Fuck you," George spits, springing at him.

They exchange blows; Tubbo takes a couple to the stomach and one to the nose without much more than a wince, George takes a whole lot of punches to the face. They're a flurry of fists and kicks and insults, all hurled at each other without a second thought. After one particularly disarming kick to the shin, Tubbo stumbles back, catching his balance on Shroud as the drone floats by him.

His mouth tastes like metal and his lungs are burning. He's dragged it out enough. "Fire," Tubbo mutters to Shroud, and it immediately starts to unload its rubber bullets. George dives out of the way, ducking behind a chunk of concrete. Tubbo narrows his eyes at the spray of blood that peeks out from George's makeshift cover. "C'mon out, fuckface, you've lost!"

A bullet whizzes past Tubbo's ear. Bastard's got *another* gun. One with bullets this time. That's fine. Tubbo can deal with another gun.

He dives behind a pile of rubble as the ricocheting of bullets against metal makes his ears ring, the sound almost deafening. He has a line of sight on George now, though, and he whips a web out to snatch the pistol from his hands, aiming it at George's left knee and pulling the trigger with frighteningly little hesitation.

George falls with a loud cry, and Tubbo stumbles out from behind the cover, tossing the gun to the ground and kicking it aside. Shroud hovers beside him, its glowing red eyes hazy against the still-settling dust. He strides forward, closing the distance between him and the man who's had a heavy hand in all of the torture he knows his best friend has had to endure, and who's likely had an equally heavy hand in all of the torture Tubbo doesn't know about yet.

"I know you're not the *real* Spider-Man," George snarls, like a wild animal that's been cornered, which, Tubbo supposes, he kind of is. His leg is sluggishly bleeding, viscera visible from the hole in his knee. Tubbo almost laughs at how panicked he looks. Almost. George's eyes snap to his-or, Tubbo *assumes* they do, based on what little he can see from the crack in George's signature sunglasses. "I know who you are. You're weaker than he was."

Tubbo refuses to let the words shake him.

His best friend is off being tortured, carted off after being killed in one of the most brutal ways possible, and he'd bore witness to his corpse being carried off a roof. Tubbo feels nothing but numbness and rage, a slow-boiling tsunami that has replaced his grief. He *will* win. He *will* be bringing Tommy home. The trivial matter of how many monsters he has to kill on the way to that goal doesn't much matter to him anymore. Maybe it makes him a horrible person to be

so blasé about snuffing out someone's life, but Tubbo can't much bring himself to care. Not when Tommy could have been killed a thousand times over by now.

An eye for an eye and the world goes blind, a voice that sounds like Puffy's whispers in the back of his mind, and Tubbo scowls behind the mask. Doing things Puffy's way had gotten her kidnapped, evidently, and it's more like an eye for several murders, so Tubbo's not certain that analogy entirely fits this situation. Besides, he's sure Puffy won't mind. She'd probably do it in his place if she were here, in fact.

If there's anything he gets from Puffy, it's his ruthlessness when it comes to people who hurt those he cares about.

"You want to know the biggest difference between me and the *real* Spider-Man?" Tubbo asks, voice dangerously quiet, and George's hands scrabble along the ruined brick for purchase as his injured knee buckles. He very visibly bites back a shout of pain, clearly trying to elicit sympathy, but this isn't Tommy he's facing. This isn't the kind, holding-his-strength-back, ever-empathetic superhero. This is Tubbo, who has a one-track mind and a very flexible moral compass. Tubbo runs a finger over Shroud's cool metal back, and the drone's bullet chambers start to whirl to life, ready to strike. "The *real* Spider-Man had a strict 'no kill' policy. But me? Well, I have no such qualms."

What Tubbo can see of George's skin visibly pales, and he smiles sardonically-not that George can see it, of course. "Wait," George says, one hand up and one still braced against the wall behind him, "j-just wait a second!"

And *oh*, isn't that just *hilarious*. George is begging for his life after playing a part in ending Tommy's, and he really thinks that's going to work. Tubbo tilts his head and taps once on Shroud's back. "Don't worry," Tubbo tells him, "Dream will be joining you in hell shortly."

Just as Shroud starts to fire, a sheet of dented metal slides in front of George, and Tubbo whips around, hands balling into fists as he watches Dream and his stupid television head stroll down floating car doors and lampposts like they're a set of stairs. Tubbo

immediately starts whipping webs in his direction, only to be blocked by the bits and pieces of metal Dream's done using as his makeshift footholds.

"I hear hell is *lovely* this time of year," Dream says in an amused drawl. "I can't wait to pay it a visit. What're you waiting for, Tubbo? C'mon, get on with it!"

"I'm gonna kill you," Tubbo says, because he *will*, he's going to kill Dream so slowly and painfully that it'll take a decade for the last breath to leave his lungs in a rattle.

Dream tuts, like he's scolding a toddler for drawing on the walls in crayon, and shakes his head, that same infuriating amusement visible from his body language, from the humor in his tone. It only serves to make Tubbo *angrier*, the fact that Dream has no problem making this whole thing seem laughable, as if Tubbo isn't about to gouge out his eyes with his bare hands and feed them back to him.

"Well, that'll just have to wait for another day," Dream tells him, nodding to where George is-or, rather, had *previously* been-and Tubbo curses under his breath. "I'll be seeing you around, I'm sure. Just another thorn in my side, as I've got things to do today-I'll leave you and your imagination to fill in the gaps-but don't worry, Tubbo! It's all gonna be over before you know it. I'll put you out of your misery soon enough."

Tubbo launches at him, Shroud at the ready, but he's fucking *gone*, and a few drones are in his place. Fucking illusion tech. Tubbo picks up George's discarded pistol and shoots them down, emptying the clip into the hard plastic shells of the miserable things. "Fucking drones, of course it was *drones*, I swear," he mutters, and Shroud whirs in a trill of indignance. Tubbo rolls his eyes. "Not you, you big baby. You're *way* more advanced than these."

With his frustration successfully taken out on a couple of unfeeling machines, Tubbo swings up to his usual rooftop, one that Tommy had hung out on pretty often on his patrols. He tilts his head up at the sky and lifts up the bottom half of his mask to wipe at the blood that's steadily dripping from his nose with the back of his hand. George had thrown a pretty decent punch to his face, and Tubbo

has no doubts that Techno and Phil and Kristin and Foolish will be fretting over him. Quackity, too, when he inevitably comes back over to give them status updates about the security codes and Charlie's distraction plans.

Staring at the backs of his knuckles, stained red now and quickly drying into a tacky texture, Tubbo wonders why his hands have started to shake. Dwelling on how it had felt to shoot someone with his own two hands rather than by extension, than with Shroud, isn't going to do him any good now. Besides, he wants the bastards dead, doesn't he? He has no problem with watching them die, with being the one to do it.

Maybe that decision should be left to Tommy. Maybe Tubbo hasn't replaced the grief with numbness and anger. Maybe he's just festering and frustrated with his lack of progress, and maybe he's forgetting why Tommy'd had the no-kill rule in the first place. Idly, Tubbo admits that Tommy has a point about that whole thing; murdering someone is a scary prospect in theory, sure, but Tubbo had made his peace with it. He *wants* them to die. He *wants* to kill them both, wants them to suffer like they've no doubt made sure Tommy has, but in practice?

In practice, Tubbo is barely a legal adult, his aunt is missing, and he had watched his best friend's corpse get carried off of a rooftop to be resurrected and killed and resurrected again.

Presumably, anyway.

He wonders what Tommy would say if he could see Tubbo now. Would he be disappointed in Tubbo for wanting someone dead? No, no, he'd known Tubbo had wanted the menagerie of villains dead and they'd only just bickered about it. More likely than not, he'd just be pissed at Tubbo for putting himself in danger.

But he *owes* it to Tommy. Not in the bullshit way that Tommy had thought he'd owed something to the city, no, but in a *real* way. Tubbo had let Tommy die on his watch. He'll never forgive himself for that, even knowing that Tommy had pointedly refused to blame him, even knowing that Tommy probably *still* won't blame him. Tommy had made Tubbo his guy-in-the-chair, and Tubbo had let

him down.

In a way, Tubbo is angry with Tommy. He's furious that he'd think to put himself in such a dangerous position in the first place, all those months ago. He's furious that Tommy hadn't told him about it immediately. He's furious that Tommy hadn't told *anyone* intentionally, had kept this secret to himself and let it fester until the confrontation had been unavoidable. He's furious that Tommy would go and get himself killed, would get himself kidnapped and leave behind a mess of his loved ones.

And then, of course, Tubbo always immediately feels guilty for being angry. Tommy had only been trying to do the right thing. He's only ever tried to do the right thing. It's just in Tommy's nature. Tubbo doesn't know what to do with himself, if he's being perfectly honest. His brain is a mess of guilt and grief and anger and numbness and loss, and he's never been told what to do with that, never had this much emotion in him all at once.

Sure, living most of his life with a therapist had given him some pretty damn decent compartmentalization tools, but this? This is a whole different can of worms, one that Tubbo isn't certain he can find the answer to. But that's Tubbo's whole *thing*. He finds solutions, finds the proper way to fix problems, scours any and all available resources for what the answer is. He has *always* been practical and level-headed, but now...

Now he's acting irrationally. Unpredictably. Impulsively.

It's sickly ironic.

The same behaviors he'd found mildly annoying in Tommy are plaguing his personality now. Grief has turned him into someone brash, someone who makes split-second decisions without debating carefully on all of the options first, and Tubbo doesn't like that, not one bit.

And *fuck*, he understands why Tommy had punched the mirror now.

Hell, if anything, Tubbo has *more* respect for Tommy's self-restraint now. A month of losing his sense of self is all Tubbo needed to feel

like killing a man with his own two hands is justifiable. Tommy had been going through all of this and worse for *months*, and he'd just put a crack in his dining room table and broken a bathroom mirror.

He wonders if Tommy can see the sky from where he is. He doubts an underground laboratory would have many decent places for stargazing, but *still*. Tubbo wants, if only just for a moment, to pretend as though Tommy's seeing the same sight he is right now, even if it's a bit delusional to think so. Maybe even a little unhinged.

But the sky is painted in all sorts of colors. Pale, soft yellows that remind him of Wilbur's sweaters, dusty pinks to rival Techno's hair, deep oranges that remind him of jumping into leaf piles with Tommy as kids, pale blues that frankly hit a *bit* too close to home. The sky is a million and one colors, and Tommy is stuck underground, unable to see the canvas the sky has become today. It's quite silly, honestly; Tubbo knows that Tommy has seen hundreds, has seen *thousands* of sunsets before, and he'll see a plethora of them again, but there's something about this one, *this* sunset, that has tears rolling down Tubbo's cheeks.

The hot tears mix unpleasantly with the sticky, dried blood on his cheeks, jaw, and lips, and Tubbo frowns, wiping harshly at his face with the back of his forearm. The suit's in need of a repair and a wash anyway, what's the harm in adding some more gross shit to the mix? It'll just serve to make everyone even more worried about him, which is annoying, but Tubbo can handle it, just like he's handled it for the past month.

A You look dreadful, let me get you something to eat, from Wilbur.

A definite Kid, take a minute. Sit down and relax, take a moment for yourself, just for one morning, alright? from Techno.

A healthy amount of We're all worried about you, from Kristin.

Too many long silences from Phil.

He knows they're reacting less so to *him*, and more to what-to who-he reminds them of.

In any case, they'll just up their fretting to an unhealthy degree if he stays out here for too long, so Tubbo yanks the mask back over his chin and stretches, wincing as his joints pop. Then, there's a crackling noise in his ear-the speakers in the comms must be damaged, another thing for him to repair later-and he sits up, ramrod straight.

"Code red," Phil says, voice clipped and breaking, *"get home right now."*

Tubbo barrels through the door, trying desperately to catch his breath as adrenaline runs through his veins like ice. Kristin is already there to greet him, an arm around his shoulders immediately. He's ushered into the living room, where Phil shoves a steaming mug of tea into his hands, and Techno places a hand on his shoulder, a steady, grounding presence.

"It's good news," Phil tells him, *"very good news. But it was also really urgent, which is-"*

"The reason for the code red, yes, I get it," Tubbo says breathlessly. "What is it? What's gone on?"

And there's Puffy, standing in the doorway with a blanket draped over her shoulders.

Tubbo drops the mug of tea. Techno catches it, thankfully, and Tubbo is free to run into Puffy's outstretched arms, not bothering to hide his sobs as the two of them sink to the ground. She cards her fingers through his hair and gently whispers words of comfort, telling him she's *here, not going anywhere ever again, promise*, and he clutches to the back of her shirt like a lifeline.

Foolish isn't far behind, silent and strong arms coming to wrap around the both of them. Tubbo is thankful for him, thankful that he's gotten his shit together between Phil's code red and Tubbo arriving, because Puffy probably doesn't need both of them to be complete messes at the same time. Tubbo still hasn't managed to catch his breath from running, and he chokes on another sob as Puffy's tears

fall into his hair.

She pulls back from the group hug carefully and takes Tubbo's face into her hands, eyes sunken with bags beneath them he hasn't seen in over a decade. "You're hurt," she says, voice thick with tears, and he only nods, giving her an apologetic smile that makes his split lip sting. Puffy brushes his hair from his forehead and tuts, always the worrier, even though she's easily worse off at the moment. "Tubbo, you need to get cleaned up."

"That can wait," he says, his laugh bubbling out as a bewildered sort of sound. "You... you're back. I thought-there was a business card and I-but I didn't want to think-"

"I'm home," Puffy whispers, a quiet promise that she won't be leaving again anytime soon, and Tubbo nods. Foolish stands, and Tubbo watches him move into the kitchen and return with a bowl of water and a rag. Puffy moves back further, and Tubbo resists the urge to follow her, to make sure she's at his side so that no one he cares about can ever be taken from him like that again. Puffy wraps the blanket around her shoulders tighter and nods. "Let Foolish get all that gunk off your face, okay? Then we can talk."

Tubbo could very easily do it himself, but he's feeling a little fragile right now. He can take a moment to be taken care of.

Sitting on his heels, Foolish starts to gingerly scrub away the dirt and the dust and the blood and the tears from his face, and Tubbo lets his eyes find purchase on everyone else in the room. Phil, saying something quietly to Puffy, who's nodding tiredly. Kristin, hovering over Foolish's shoulder and fretting over how battered Tubbo must look. Techno, solitary on the couch, his eyes never leaving Puffy as he dutifully holds Tubbo's cup of tea. Wilbur, nursing at a cup of his own, head leaning on Sally's shoulder as they stand at the hearth of the fireplace. Sally's in her bonnet and pyjamas, clearly not having expected to be here.

"When did you get here?" Tubbo asks Sally, not impolitely, and Sally glances over at Puffy. And *oh*, okay. Tubbo winces as Foolish presses at one particularly bad cut and both of them apologize quietly to each other. Tubbo looks up at Puffy and tries to make his

face as even and emotionless as possible. "How long have you been back?"

Puffy gives Phil's arm a reassuring squeeze before sitting to Tubbo's side and knocking their shoulders together softly enough that it doesn't disturb Foolish's work. "Thought I told you we'd talk *after* you get your face fixed," she jokes weakly, and Tubbo just raises a brow in her general direction, even though Foolish is rolling his eyes at the fact that Tubbo's moving. Puffy sighs, a quiet sound that's loud in the near-silent room, save for the slight sloshing of quickly-reddening water. "I was at Sally's for a few days."

"A few *days*?!" Tubbo asks, incredulous, and Foolish raps his knuckles lightly on Tubbo's forehead. Tubbo winces.

"Stay still," Foolish huffs, scrubbing under his nose, which Tubbo knows is still probably a bit crooked. "She's here now, isn't she?"

Puffy takes his hand and squeezes it comfortingly. For whose comfort, Tubbo can't tell. "When I... got out, I went to Sally's. I was sure I wasn't high on Dream's list of priorities, not as high as-well, anyway, I went to Sally because she's got a direct link to you all but isn't *staying*, y'know? It's not like anyone would think I'd go there first," she explains, and Tubbo nods. It makes enough sense. "I just wanted to wait a few days in case I was followed."

That's understandable. Tubbo gets it, really, he does, it's perfectly logical. But there's still something bothering him. "Why'd he take *you*?" he asks. Puffy goes even paler than she'd already been. "And how'd you get out of the facility?"

Swallowing, Puffy looks away. Foolish takes the rag and the bowl back to the kitchen, and Techno follows him in, handing Tubbo's mug of tea to him with shaking hands as he passes the two of them. Something in Tubbo's gut sinks, like he's just missed a step on the way downstairs, and Puffy draws into herself, makes herself seem smaller than she is.

"Tommy... distracted the guards," she says.

It's as good as a eulogy.

Tubbo's determined not to cry, though, and he just hums. "So?" he asks, pointedly ignoring the way his voice shakes around the words. Puffy looks at him, eyes big and teary. Tubbo runs a hand through his hair, wincing at the way his nails brush against the scrapes on his forehead. "Does that mean he's...?"

Puffy's eyes go wide then, like she hadn't realized she'd been insinuating an outcome so horrible it would shatter Tubbo completely. "No! No, *God* no, he's-he is still *very* much alive, I'm sure of it," she assures him. The expression on her face turns dark, a grimness etching across it as she scowls. "I'd bet good money that Dream wouldn't let him die, even if he tried."

Ah. Fuck.

"What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?" Sally asks, brows furrowed, and Tubbo had almost forgotten she's here with them. At his clear surprise, she gives him a sheepish smile. "Sorry, still catching up on everything, haven't been told all the details yet."

Tubbo waves her off. "Don't worry about it," he tells her, turning back to Puffy. He tries really hard to swallow down the nausea that comes with thinking about just how often Tommy's had to die in order for Puffy to be so confident about that. "So he's still using the device?"

Kristin had mentioned it in passing the other day. She hadn't said definitively whether or not Dream had been using it frequently when he'd brought Tommy to the office building to taunt her, and Tubbo has been carefully dancing around the idea that he's used it more than once, but the look on her face...

Tubbo doesn't want her to confirm it or deny it, for his own sanity's sake.

He'll just ask Tommy when they bring him home.

Puffy shudders. It's an answer in itself, and she seems to know it. After a moment of silence, Phil claps his hands together. "Right. I don't know about you lot, but *I*, for one, want the bastard's head in a basket sooner rather than later," he says, and there are a few murmurs of assent throughout the room. Foolish and Techno appear

in the doorway to the kitchen, clearly having talked about something. Phil glances at the two of them and gives Techno a nod. "You alright, mate?"

"Never better," Techno says with a sardonic smile.

"I say we move out tomorrow," Puffy says. All eyes in the room turn to her, Tubbo's included, and she just shrugs. "I've been sleeping and eating better these past few days than I have in a couple weeks, and I didn't exactly get the worst of it."

A sort of chill settles over the room at that, and Kristin clears her throat. "I think we should make our move tomorrow, too. We'll contact Quackity with the burner phones, let him know we're doing it," she says, and Sally steps forward, nodding.

"You've got two additional bodies with you. Manpower's up," she says. "I've got a bat in my car, as far as weapons go. Nothing much other than that, though, sorry to say. I'll do whatever you need me to."

Techno nudges Tubbo's shoulder. "You finish those finger things yet?" he asks, and Tubbo gives him a manic grin. Of *course* he'd finished them. They'd been close to the first things he'd gotten done, and he's *extremely* excited to see Dream get his ass kicked with his own weapons. As Wilbur steps closer to join the sort of huddle that's forming, Techno puts a hand on his chest. "I don't think so. You're stayin' here. Like Tubbo said ages ago, you're better off here."

"That's bullshit! I can fight as well as any of you!" Wilbur protests, and *several* brows go up, Tubbo's included. Wilbur crosses his arms. "I'm not about to sit here and act like you're not all marching into a fucking warzone, alright?! I can fight! I'll go in with you guys, or I'll go with the distraction, give me *something*-"

"Dream's not going to take this sitting down," Puffy says, suddenly as stern as she gets when Tubbo's spent a week staying up past curfew down in the garage. "We need as many people on the field as possible, yes, *but* we need someone here. We need someone manning the fort while the rest of us go in. I know my way around well enough-I was never transported with a blindfold, which was a

stupid move on their end-so I'll go in with Kristin and Techno. Tubbo, you-

"I'm going in with you," Tubbo cuts in. "I'm not staying back. I need to be there."

Puffy sighs, but she clearly knows she can't stop him, so she concedes, standing at the front of the room next to Kristin, who looks more somber and serious than Tubbo's seen her all month, and that's saying something. "Fine. Kristin, Techno, Tubbo, and I will go into the facility. I can lead everyone around the facility itself, Kristin can get us in without looking *too* suspicious, Techno's our muscle, and Tubbo's tech can get us through whatever blocks there might be," she says, raising her brows as if daring anyone in the room to challenge her. No one does.

Kristin folds her hands in front of her. "Phil, Foolish, and Sally will raise hell on one end of the city with Quackity, and Charlie's got the other side covered," she says. "Sapnap will get Dream and George out of the place for long enough for us to get in. Wil, we need you here in case anyone needs to retreat earlier than planned or in case one of us gets lost in the kerfuffle, we'll all meet back here. You're in charge of keeping the house secure."

"This is bullshit," Wilbur says again, but he doesn't protest further.

"Actually, it would make more sense for me to tag along with the distraction team," Techno points out. Tubbo has to wonder if he's only saying this because he wouldn't be able to handle seeing whatever state Tommy's in when they find him. "Sally should go in with you guys instead. Dream's ego will keep him fightin' me for the title of 'best psychic metal user' for long enough that it'll give you a significantly longer amount of time, and Sally's never been seen with us by them before, as far as we know."

Sally perks up. "That's a great point, actually," she says, and Tubbo follows her gaze as she looks out the window. Sally frowns. "It's getting late. If we've got all our bases covered for tomorrow, we should try and get some rest."

"Agreed. Everyone to bed," Kristin says, and Techno starts to set up

the futon.

As everyone files off, Tubbo catches Puffy by the arm before she goes. “Hey,” he says quietly, “I don’t know... I won’t ask you what happened down there, but we’re getting him out of there. We are. We’re gonna kick Dream’s ass and get Tommy back. You know that, right?”

There’s something sad in Puffy’s eyes as she nods and smiles at him.

“Yeah,” she tells him, ruffling his hair, “I know.”

It's back! :D

Hope you guys enjoyed this chapter, hopefully I'll be able to get them out fairly frequently now :)

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Y

Chapter 74: Y

Elevators, guards, and a fresh lack of spiders.

CW for spiders :)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Theseus is exhausted.

“Again,” Dream says over the speakers, and the knife lodges in his back for the third time in as many minutes. The pain has evened out into a low, steady thrum at this point. It barely even hurts anymore, but the feeling of injustice it provokes is white-hot as it churns in Theseus’s gut, a cry of outrage leaving his throat as the knife is plunged in again. “Have you learned your lesson yet, Theseus? Because there are still fourteen more guards we had to revive that you haven’t gotten stabbed for yet, if we need to keep reminding you of the harm you’ve done.”

Theseus’s jaw clenches. The man in the fox mask casually wipes the knife off with a stained rag, red spreading through the white threads like an oil spill in the ocean. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t aware that it was *my* fault that you put people’s lives in danger in order to keep me prisoner here,” he grits out, the taste of iron prominent on his tongue and lingering behind his teeth. “My bad for trying to escape being *tortured-*”

The knife plunges in again. Theseus lets out a broken, feeble sort of noise. It's more humiliating than it is painful. "You're annoying," the man in the fox mask tells him, and Theseus flips him off. Another plunge. The man in the fox mask doesn't bother taking the knife out, instead standing above him with his hands on his hips. "You want me to keep going?"

The question is directed at the ceiling. Theseus yanks the knife out of his side, clutching at the quickly-closing wound. He hates that it heals itself so fast, hate that it means more pain is inevitable, that it means more experiments and tests, that it means he's something that isn't quite human. He stumbles to a stand, leaning against the wall with the knife gripped loosely in his fist. Fuck it. He's done enough carnage, taken enough blows. He'd kill in a heartbeat to get out of here, especially if it meant killing someone that's had a hand in torturing him.

No, his mind whispers, *you wouldn't*.

He wouldn't.

He can't bring himself to.

But the mere notion of Theseus holding the knife is enough to have several armed guards storm in and sedate him. Obviously, because God forbid *anything* be easy for him, he's restrained when he wakes up again in his room. Dream is in front of him, arms crossed as he stares evenly at Theseus. Delightful company, truly.

"You're causing me problems, Theseus," Dream says. And, *duh*, why the hell wouldn't he? He feels as if he's earned it over the past couple of days-or weeks, or months, however long it's been. Theseus's sense of time is utterly fucked.

Torture under the guise of experiments, lies and manipulation, the withholding of his memories, the list goes on and on, becomes endless, spills over the edge of the goddamned earth like a fog rolling across a hill and obscuring the bottom. Theseus tilts his head up to look at the cold steel above him, because he's going to projectile vomit if he's forced to look at Dream's stupid, ugly face any longer.

He just has to hold out a little bit longer. Puffy's coming, she's going to get help, Theseus just has to wait until she comes back for him. He takes a moment to wonder who she'll bring along. He doesn't think the police would help-Dream seems too rich and powerful for that, considering the expensive lab equipment and vast crew helping him out. Maybe Puffy will bring whoever Theseus had known before all of this.

Maybe, just maybe, Theseus has a whole slew of family and friends on the other side.

Maybe Puffy will bring along the *W*he remembers.

Dream snaps his fingers in Theseus's face. "I asked you a question," he grits out, and Theseus wants to pull that damn mask off his face, wants to take away Dream's ability to keep his facial expressions unreadable. "*Answer me*, Theseus."

"Oh no," Theseus drones, "I don't remember what you asked. My memory's going again, surely. Goodbye, traumatic experiences. Amnesia, my great love, has come for me once more to rescue me from this hell."

Dream's eyes narrow. Theseus is annoying him. *Good*. "I'm going to give you thirty seconds to explain yourself before I *actually* erase your memories again," he says, and Theseus clenches his jaw.

He doesn't want to give Dream the satisfaction of an answer, but it's honestly a toss-up as to whether Dream will actually follow through with his threat. "I didn't want to be stabbed anymore," Theseus says, "so I took the knife out and held it. I wasn't going to *hurt* anyone, I wouldn't-"

"But you *did*," Dream reminds him. "You *did* hurt people. Lots of people, Theseus."

Bodies strewn about the hallway. Shattered glass refracting shards of red light across the walls as the alarms blare in a deafening tone. Electricity crackling across his skin, power flowing through him, making him feel real, keeping him grounded, even as the blood splattered here and there makes him feel as though he's going to

crawl out of his own skin.

A crack in a table.

A frown on a brother's face.

A body, stained red and familiar, amongst the rubble of what used to be a building.

Theseus swallows around the lump that's formed in his throat. "They were going to hurt me," he says, the excuse sounding weak to his own ears.

Dream leans forward, arms folded across his knees. "You killed them, Theseus," he says, icy and quiet. "We had to bring them all back."

"I'm sorry," Theseus says in spite of himself, because he *is* sorry. He's not apologizing to Dream, though, he's apologizing to all of the people he's hurt, to the guards and the brother and the body in the rubble.

That sentiment doesn't seem to register to Dream, because he nods, seemingly satisfied with Theseus's apology. "Good," he appraises. "Don't do it again."

He leaves.

Theseus's restraints are released, and he sits down in the corner of the room, tracing the letter *W* into the floor, over and over again. Someone is waiting for him on the other side, someone other than Puffy, and that's enough to give him hope. Someone with round glasses, someone who smells vaguely of cigarette smoke and coffee, someone comforting and annoying like only a brother can be.

Selfishly, Theseus lets himself wonder if there's anyone else waiting, lets himself mull over the idea that more people are eagerly awaiting his return. Maybe a full set of parents, maybe a friend or two or even three. He wonders what they'd be like, wonders if there's more to brotherhood than the faceless *W*.

Pink stains in the tub. Swords and sparks on metal. Dry wit.

Keyboards clacking, monitors flashing. A bee pin. Video games and studying. Confessions of anxiety.

He prays for a name that never comes to him.

Someone, somewhere, is wondering where their friend has gone. Where their brother, their son, their *hero*, *friendly neighborhood vigilante-menace-nuisance-hero-*

Theseus's head pounds with the pain of trying to remember. Shit, maybe Dream *hadn't* lied about the overexertion that comes with recovering memories. Theseus sighs and tilts his head back, eyes closed as he takes slow, deep breaths. It's been a couple of days since Puffy had escaped. He's almost sure of it.

What's taking her so long?

Immediately, he chastises himself for thinking like that. Puffy had gone through an incredible trauma, and she'd been malnourished and injured to boot. Surely, she just needs some time to recuperate and gather help before she comes to get him. That's all, that's what's preventing the rescue effort from getting to him. He can't lose hope now, can't let go of that dangling thread, because the looming sense of hopelessness clouding the back of his mind is almost worse than the actual, physical torture he's gone through.

Perhaps it's because with the hopelessness comes the realization that this might never end.

Theseus doesn't want to think too hard about that potential outcome.

He must fall asleep on the floor, because when he wakes, he's strapped to a medical table, and there's a spider on his face.

Fucking *delightful*.

Theseus bites back the urge to scream-with protest comes pain-and instead wills a shock forward to put the poor little bastard out of its misery. Thankfully, it doesn't bite him before he kills it, but now there's a dead spider on his face, and he'd very much like to get it off of him. He's sure that Dream is the one over the intercom, bitching about how he's killed a very important and scientific spider,

but Theseus looks up and sees Hannah looking down at him.

She seems as if she might start crying. He wonders why.

"Are you alright?" he asks her, and she looks away, unresponsive. Her hand squeezes his shoulder briefly, though, and Theseus has to hope that means she is.

"We don't have any more spiders," Ponk's familiar voice says to his left, and Theseus perks up, because he hasn't seen Ponk in ages. Ponk had always been the nicest of the doctors. "You said not to produce any more! You told us they were *too* effective, Dream, I—"

"That doesn't fucking matter anymore! Fuck!"

Dream's upset about something.

Good, a spiteful part of Theseus's brain whispers. There's the steady beeping of machinery, and as the sedatives wear off-quickly, because his metabolism is a pain in the ass-he registers an immense amount of searing pain. They're *experimenting* again. Probably something with his bones, if the scraping is anything to go by. Theseus doesn't look down.

They sedate him again, of course.

They've been doing that a lot lately. It's probably because he pointedly refuses to cooperate with any of their demands unless he's quite literally on the brink of death, but it's still incredibly inconvenient. Theseus is always groggy now, never fully lucid unless there's adrenaline pumping through him, battling the sedatives. Then again, Theseus isn't entirely sure he'd even want to be completely awake, considering how painful the glimpses of full-consciousness he gets are.

Theseus wakes in his room. Again. At least he's on the cot this time, rather than in that horrible chair. Theseus *hates* that chair. It means interrogations and restraint and threats and *pain*. But everything means pain in this terrible, terrible place, so being picky about where exactly he's getting that pain isn't doing him any favors.

He stares up at the ceiling. It's day... however many now of waiting

for Puffy to come rescue him, and he's half-tempted to try and scratch tally marks into the wall. If he were to make any progress in doing so, though, Dream would be a prick about it. At least the ceiling has *something* on it, as opposed to the completely barren walls and floor. There's a vent right above him, probably for keeping him uncomfortably cold.

Cold weather means hibernation.

Theseus glares up at the metal grates, wondering if anyone would bring him an extra blanket if he asked. Ponk would, definitely, and maybe Hannah, if he were lucky, but Dream wouldn't, George wouldn't, and the man in the fox mask wouldn't either. His chances at warmth aren't great, which sucks, considering how big the vent blowing cold air through the room is.

... Wait.

The vent is fucking *huge*. Probably not big enough to fit a full person, though.

Not unless they were severely malnourished.

Maybe something good has come from the torture after all.

Theseus squints. He could probably jump up to the ceiling and *stick to it, you could stick to it, you've done it before, trust your instincts, they'll protect you*, but would it be a good idea? No, no, they surely have thermal imaging up there, so even if he makes himself invisible, they'd find him. Can anyone else fit in the vents, though? There's no shot, but that doesn't mean they won't find a way to get to him before he escapes the ventilation system.

But what if he were to make them *think* he's trying to escape through the vents? What if he were to turn himself invisible, to fuck with the vent cover until it comes crashing to the ground, to create enough of a diversion to where people will be swarming through the door? *It could work*, some long-forgotten and mischievous part of his mind whispers, *you could shove your way through the incoming guards*.

There's only so much time before Dream tells him to get in the chair

again, only so much time before the pain comes back with a vengeance. Only so much time before the next experiment, the next round of sedatives and spiders and bullshit treatments.

Theseus jumps to the ceiling.

His feet land-clumsily, sure, but sturdy enough-and he immediately makes his body disappear, hands wrenching at the metal grates. The cold steel makes his palms sting, there's no doubt in his mind, even though he can't see them, that his fingers are turning red as he tugs at it. A bolt comes loose, then another, and the metal creaks and groans, bending in ways it *definitely* isn't meant to. The last two bolts shriek and groan, the sound of metal scraping against metal ringing in Theseus's ears, and the vent cover clatters to the ground.

The alarm begins to blare. Theseus reaches into the vent and slams his hand down as hard as he can on the edge of it, then a bit further, and a bit further, and then as far as he can reach, trying to make as much noise as he can. As the door's pressurized lock hisses open, Theseus makes a mad dash across the ceiling, ducking through the doorway just as it's about to close again.

Guards rush every which way underneath him, and he watches as some remain posted at other vent covers. He crawls on the ceiling, hands splayed and legs poised in a low crouch. Something about the stance is familiar, instinctual. *Trust your instincts.* He will.

Theseus doesn't trust the color system anymore, not when there's a chance Dream had changed it, not when he's been sedated before going anywhere, left without the chance to observe the code again. There seems to be an outpouring of guards coming from one specific direction, though, so he sneaks past them, turning down the halls and praying that his invisibility won't let up until he's free.

The doors to the outside are still covered, like they haven't gotten the chance to replace the glass yet.

Theseus drops to the ground and makes a break for it, rushing past guards and knocking shoulders with them, but they're all too distracted to register that it's him pushing against them rather than the typical jostle that comes with running in a crowd. The stream of

people slows to a mere trickle, only a couple of guards lagging behind the rest and passing him as they join the efforts to try and find him.

He takes a step forward and moves through the doorway. No alarms sound-people have been getting in through here, so why would an alarm ring out for someone leaving?-and Theseus allows himself to become visible again to preserve as much energy as possible as he stumbles into a run towards the lift he sees at the end of the hall.

No one is following him yet.

He slams a hand on the panel and lets a jolt of electricity move him past the security requirement the display demands. He hits the button for the ground floor and watches with wide eyes as guards start to turn the corner, guns pointed in his direction. He fires off webs, the action almost involuntary, sticking guards and their rifles to the walls, to the floor, keeping them away from him until the doors to the lift slide shut.

The lift shudders and moves up, then creaks, jutting to a stop. The words *EMERGENCY STOP REQUESTED* flash across the display, and Theseus swears under his breath, glancing around the confining metal box. There's an emergency hatch in the ceiling, and he promptly shoves himself through it, clinging to the wall of the elevator shaft and starting to scale it.

He can feel the weariness and ache lurking behind the surge of adrenaline within him, but he keeps moving, because stopping means death, but death no longer promises relief, death is not a way to put a stop to everything anymore. He can't afford to stop now, not when he's so close to the outside world, not when he doesn't have to worry about anyone's safety but his own.

Reaching the ledge of the ground floor lift doors, Theseus plants his feet firmly on the wall and jams his fingers into the thin line of space between the doors. His arms strain as he pries them open, the metal creaking just like the vent cover had earlier, steel bending around his fingers as his knuckles whiten with the effort. He pushes himself up enough to reach a hand through to grip the other side of the door, and he *shoves*, putting his full strength into it.

He gets a shoulder out, then a foot, and then he's toppling out of the door to dozens of vaguely horrified faces. There's shouting coming from the other hallways, the familiar kind, and Theseus scrambles for the big glass doors at the front of the room, the ones that lead out into the street, just as there are commands for everyone to get down to the ground.

Shouldering the door open, glass shattering on impact, Theseus dashes out onto the pavement, into the sun. The air isn't stale, it isn't the sterilized oxygen he's used to; it's dirty city air, and he's never been happier to breathe it. But he can't relish in the fact he's gotten out just yet, not when there's a good chance the guards will grab him right off the street and drag him kicking and screaming back down to the lab.

Theseus runs barefoot down the street, bumping into concerned-looking pedestrians and mumbling apologies as he does, eyes wide and frantic as he lets some deep-seated muscle memory lead him down the side streets of the city. He must lose the guards at some point, because he doesn't hear footsteps pounding behind him.

The reality of the situation hits him.

He's outside.

The sun is bright, almost painfully so, and there's a biting chill to the breeze. It must be spring. It *has* to be. Theseus stumbles out of the alleyway he'd just passed through and feels the familiar tug of exhaustion pull at him. His hands are trembling, his head is pounding, and he's fairly certain he needs medical attention.

"Excuse me, do you know where the nearest hospital is?" he asks the next person that passes him, and they gasp, eyes wide as they hurry away. That's fair, he's not their problem, but he *really* needs help. There are a few groups of people, clustered by the walls of shops on the street, edging away from him. Theseus knows what he must look like-malnourished, gaunt, bruised and battered with no shoes and dirtied clothes. His voice is breaking. "Please, does anyone know where I can find a hospital?"

People are whispering to each other. Theseus clutches at his

hairline and whimpers as a sharp pain shoots up from his ankle. He must have twisted it at some point, maybe from jumping down from a ceiling, maybe from the shaking lift, maybe from running through the streets as fast as his body would take him. No one has stepped forward to help. He's fairly certain he hears a few camera shutters going off.

"Someone call an ambulance!" one voice calls out, and it feels as though the bystander effect that's clouded over the crowd evaporates in an instant, people rushing forward to help him into standing.

Theseus chokes out a sob. Freedom is terrifying. Needing help is terrifying. The hands bracing his arms are terrifying.

"Yeah, there's a kid here, he's hurt, pretty bad," someone else is saying.

Theseus's shoulders slump.

Exhaustion takes him instead of sedatives this time.

His initial thought as he wakes up to the sound of mechanical beeping is that he's back in the lab again.

Evidently, that idea sparks panic in him, enough to make the beeping rapid, and a million and one doctors and nurses start to swarm him, pushing him back down into the uncomfortably rigid hospital bed.

"Someone needs to sedate him," one of the nurses says, and Theseus can't scream out the *no* he wants to say because something's in his throat.

"We *tried* that," another says, "none of our sedatives are strong enough to keep him down, and we've already got him on a lethal amount of painkillers—"

"He needs more morphine," the doctor closest to his shoulder declares, peering at the vitals, "it's already wearing off. What's up

with this kid's metabolism?"

Theseus wrenches his wrist free from the nurse currently holding it down—a rather buff guy that looks surprised that Theseus could move it out of his grasp—and claws at the thing over his face, choking around whatever's stuck down his throat. Two nurses make an effort to bring his wrist back down to his side, and Theseus tries hard not to panic at being restrained.

It must show on his face, in his eyes, because the doctor at the foot of the hospital bed gestures for the nurses to step back. "Hey, you can't pull that out of your throat just yet, okay? Breathe, don't try to talk," she says, and Theseus blinks rapidly. It's uncomfortable as hell, but most sensations are quickly melting away as one of the nurses sticks a needle into his arm. "We're giving you as much pain relief as we can, but your body's... well, it's not *rejecting* it, but it's burning through it. Is it alright if we ask you a couple of yes-or-no questions?"

Theseus is scared to nod, so he just blinks and points at the thing clamped over his face. The doctor by the screens places a hand over his shoulder. "We can take the intubation out while you're still conscious, but if you'd rather be sedated, reach up and tap me twice," he says, and Theseus considers it for a moment. It's not as though he hasn't gone through worse, though, so he keeps blinking steadily up at the doctor, who nods. "Right, okay, I need another set of hands."

The sensation is unpleasant, but the pain relievers must be doing a damn good job. Theseus coughs into his elbow as soon as the tube's out, and one of the nurses is quick to hand him a cup of water with a straw. Theseus sips it carefully, not entirely convinced they haven't dissolved something in it. He doesn't feel much more tired than normal, though, so maybe it's safe.

"Alright," the doctor by the foot of the bed says, "are you okay to answer some things for us?"

Theseus nods. The nurse closest to him, the buff guy, adjusts the hospital bed to where Theseus is sitting up. Not on his own, of course, but it makes him feel a bit more at ease, being on a similar

level to the rest of the people in the room. "Can you tell us your name?" the same nurse asks, and Theseus opens his mouth to reply, only to find himself at a loss for words.

His name isn't *actually* Theseus, surely, but he still can't remember what it is. "I'm not sure," he admits, voice sounding rough, even to himself. "I-I don't know."

The nurse at his side is quick to hand him another cup of water. "Okay," the doctor at the foot of the bed says, "that's okay. Try not to strain yourself, alright? Everything we've examined so far tells us you've been through a *lot*. Can you tell us anything about it?"

Dying. Torture. Experiments. Spiders. Shockwaves. Gunshots.

What if they send you back?

"No," Theseus says, small and scared, "I can't."

"We need to know what happened to you in order to help you," one of the nurses says, slightly snappish, and Theseus flinches. The buff nurse elbows her.

"Take your time," he says. "You don't have to tell us the nature of how you got your injuries, but if there's anything you know that might affect the way we treat them, please tell us. This is a safe place, whoever hurt you can't get to you here."

But that's just the thing, isn't it?

Theseus can't be *sure* that Dream won't get to him here, that Dream won't just find him again and bring him back to the lab, that one of these nice nurses or doctors aren't secretly reporting back to him. He isn't sure who he can trust, and none of these faces are familiar.

"Your vitals seem abnormal for an ordinary person," the doctor by the screens says slowly, deliberately. "Are you...?"

The question trails off, like the doctor's implying something, and Theseus's brows furrow. "Uh, abnormal how?" he asks, and the doctor by the screens exchanges a look with the other by the foot of his bed.

Ignoring his question, the doctor by the foot of the bed crosses her arms. “Should we bring him up here? He treated Spider-Man before when that building fell on him, surely he’d be able to tell if the vitals are similar,” she says, and Theseus blinks.

Spider-Man?

Who the hell is Spider-Man?

The doctor by the screens sighs and gestures vaguely. “Sure, it couldn’t hurt,” he says.

It could very much hurt, for all Theseus knows. He doesn’t exactly want to stick around and find out what the fuck they’re talking about, but it doesn’t seem like he has much of a choice.

At least, not if he doesn’t break out of here.

And he *definitely* plans on leaving as soon as possible.

WOoo

OUR BOY'S OUT

HE'S FREE

LET'S GOOOOOOOO

[My Twitter](#)

[My Tumblr](#)

reunited

Chapter 75: reunited

Things come to a head when Kristin finds herself in a precarious duel with some drones.

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Kristin isn't sure what's going on.

She'd gone to work, just as they'd all planned, playing the part of a grieving mother that's working in spite of it, and while most of her coworkers have been amicable, there's a weird sort of tension in the air. Normally, Kristin would write it off as her own paranoia, but this is different. This kind of tension has her on the edge of her seat, has her eyes darting around the empty, still space of her office, has her glancing out the window every few minutes.

Hands hovering over her keyboard, Kristin tries to direct her attention back to the reports she's been asked to approve. The cursor blinks on the screen, and with it, Kristin's eye twitches. The clock ticks, a painfully loud sound in the quiet office, and she's half-tempted to chuck it out the window. Kristin sighs and bounces her leg, glaring at the thin red line on the graph like it's purposefully mocking her.

The hours aren't passing fast enough.

Kristin looks down at her phone, teeth worrying at her bottom lip. There's no notifications-those are reserved for the burner phone that weighs more than it should in her pocket-and her brows furrow. She's meant to leave the phone behind once she leaves for the day, an excuse as to why she can't be reached by any of the executives.

It feels stupid to be as cautious as they're being with only a select few parts of the plan, but Kristin's willing to play along if it means she'll get her kid back.

She glances out the window and perches her chin in her hand, painfully aware of the blinking security camera in the corner of the room. It had once made her feel safe, protected by her company in case of an emergency, but now it makes her stomach churn with anger and nerves, wondering whether the same security watching her every move is doing the same to her youngest son. Ironically, it's a lovely day today. She wonders if it'll hold up until the evening, but it seems like there's clouds pushing in already. Typical London weather.

Wait.

That's not a cloud.

That's a drone.

Kristin dives under her desk just as the turrets start to whirl, and the glass of the massive window that makes up an entire wall of her office shatters, and she swears under her breath as bullets ricochet around her, brows knit together. Had someone found out about the plan? Does Dream know they're coming for Tommy? Well, whatever the case, she needs to get out of this stupid, *stupid* building.

She snatches up her fallen desk lamp and holds her breath as the drone trills to a stop and hovers closer, the sound of the fans her only indication that it's moving. Kristin waits until it sounds close enough that she could reach out and grab it, and she does, smashing the lamp into it and sticking the jagged metal into the shell of it once the lamp breaks in half.

Scrambling out from under the desk, Kristin watches more drones float down into view, and she doesn't wait a second longer before making a mad dash out of her office. She slams the door shut behind her and straightens herself up, speed-walking to the nearest lift and giving passersby a friendly-if strained-nod. She wouldn't put unnecessary casualties past Dream, but she doesn't think he'd take that chance, not when this floor is full of well-known personnel,

people whose deaths would be in the public eye and scrutinized.

The thought of it makes her feel ill, but if it buys her time, she's happy to deal with the momentary nausea.

She takes the lift down to Quackity's old floor.

The abandoned workshop is eerie, far too quiet for comfort, and Kristin stays vigilant as she makes her way through the half-finished projects into the weapons locker. For the most part, the shelves of what probably used to be pistols and the like have been picked clean, but there are still a good few things left, and she's not about to complain about bigger options. She probably doesn't have much time, so she just starts to grab what she can.

Strapping a rocket launcher to her back, Kristin winces at the weight of it; though she can't operate it-definitely a good way to accidentally blow a limb off if she tries to-she knows a formal naval captain that's more than capable. She grabs two of the machine guns, one for her and one for Phil, when she fights her way home, and she makes sure the safety's flicked on for two pistols before holstering them and strapping the holsters to her waist. That should be good enough to get her out of the building.

There's a sound in the other room, over by where the entry to the lab is, and Kristin swears under her breath, strapping one of the machine guns to her back alongside the rocket launcher and hefting the remaining one up, aiming at the doorway. At this point, her options are down to kill or be killed, and Kristin's not taking any chances.

Sure enough, armed drones start to swarm into the room, and Kristin opens fire, eyes narrowed in focus.

They drop like flies.

One bodily thud by the doorway draws her attention as the drones spark and die on the floor, and Kristin looks over to find a familiar man in a fox mask slumped by the exit to the locker. She tosses away the empty magazine and reloads before making her way over to him, and she aims the barrel right between his eyes. He's

clutching his arm, but his pistol is by his leg, and she snatches it up, jaw clenched.

“Please,” he manages, blood-stained palm open by his chest as he pulls it away from his injured arm, and Kristin affixes him with as cold of a glare as she can muster. His chest heaves. “There’s more drones coming, you don’t stand a chance, just-if you surrender now-”

“Go to hell,” she tells him, and she pistol-whips him, watching with a dark sort of satisfaction as he crumples against the wall, unconscious.

Kristin empties the ammunition from the pistol and tosses it across the room, adjusting the guns on her back as she steps over the last of the drones to leave the locker. She ignores the startled yells of her colleagues as she takes the nearest lift, all of them shifting to stand flat against the walls of it. The absurdity of having a rocket launcher on her back to the tune of the cheesy elevator music makes her want to laugh and cry at the same time, and she makes sure the machine gun is locked and loaded before she steps out into the lobby.

It’s markedly empty, save for the few drones whose hovering comes to a stop as soon as she steps out of the lift.

Kristin’s fairly tired of having to shoot down machines, but she’s getting the feeling that this is only the beginning. As she presses her finger to the trigger, teeth grit as she does her best to take the recoil, Kristin listens as the sound of bullets sinking into metal intermingles with hissing sparks in a dissonant harmony, and she hisses as a bullet grazes past her arm, not making contact, but close enough to feel the heat from the gunpowder. She takes a deep breath as she advances forward, eyes narrowed with concentration.

Her brows furrow as she takes down the last of the drones in the lobby, and Kristin remains on her guard as she steps over the heap of now-scrap metal, shoes crunching against the shards of glass that had scattered with the ricocheting bullets. Kristin ducks into the street, retreating into a nearby alleyway and setting the gun down to rip a strip of fabric from her long skirt and tie it around the lower half

of her face. If she's going to commit a crime-even in self-defense-fairly openly, she might as well take a page out of her kid's book and at least *try* to hide her face somewhat.

Grabbing the gun again, Kristin peeks out from the cover of the alleyway. Sure enough, there are drones patrolling the street, though they're far more scattered than the others. She curses under her breath, silently regretting her decision to leave behind the single sniper rifle in the weapons locker. There are a few pedestrians out on the street, though, which means the possibility of collateral casualties is far too great for Kristin's liking.

It seems as though the few people that remain on the street have the good sense to retreat at the sight of the drones, though, which brings her a bit of relief. Kristin catches a glimpse of a mother pushing her son behind her further down the street, and she swallows around the quickly-growing lump in her throat as their backs turn and disappear behind a corner. The street looks empty enough now, and her finger feels like lead on the trigger as she steps out from the shadows and opens fire on every drone she can see.

She's forced to take cover behind a couple of cars as the drones swarm into a formation, and she winces at the sound of metal-on-metal clanging and screeching. The windows of the car shatter above her head, and Kristin ducks away as the glass falls, not daring to make a sound, even as a piece catches the skin on the back of her hand. The sounds fade, and there's the general thrumming of whatever systems are making the drones fly, and Kristin takes her chance to aim through the vacant windows of the car to take out the formation.

Swapping out the empty magazine as the last drone falls and sputters a final, dying spark, Kristin stalks down the emptied street, turning down alleyways when she can and keeping to the darkest corners of them whenever possible. She needs to get home. If Dream has enough nerve to try and kill her in the middle of the goddamn work day, there's no telling what he's tried to do to her family, to her home.

There's probably more stock in saving the magazines she'd grabbed

than using them up on the few drones patrolling the streets, so she keeps out of their line of sight, remembering what Sapnap had told them all about the schematics of the drones during their last meeting. If their software recognizes her irises, they'll start shooting and won't stop. Kristin kind of wishes she'd grabbed her purse on her way out; she'd had a pair of sunglasses stowed away at the bottom.

Nevertheless, she slowly but surely makes her way closer and closer to the house, doing her best to ignore the sinking feeling in her stomach when the drones get more and more clustered. Their normally pleasant suburban-esque neighborhood feels quietly dystopian as she pushes forward, like something out of a zombie apocalypse movie, and Kristin doesn't want to think too hard about the distant, soft sounds of a commotion in the direction of their street.

She keeps to her cover of cars, but as they get spread further apart, she's forced to wait out the passing drones. Her heels, though necessary in the main streets of the city, are discarded in the grass of someone's lawn-someone she'd probably taken her kids trick-or-treating to, someone she's probably said hello to in passing-and she prays that the guns strapped to her body make little noise as she dashes from car to car once the units of drones have passed. The sounds of the commotion get louder, and, sure enough, Kristin can pick out the distinct noise of gunfire and metal against metal. There's some talking underneath it all, but it's too faint to make out.

Finally, Kristin gets close enough to see five figures in the distance, along with enough drones to topple a building. She picks up speed, ready to shoot as the five people are forced to take cover at the oncoming wave of gunfire. As she presses down on the trigger, shots ringing out in the normally quiet street, she prays that the spray of bullets doesn't ricochet, prays that her attempt at rescue doesn't turn to tragedy.

As the last of the drones fall, her chest heaves with labored breaths, and she runs to her family, asphalt sharp and uncomfortable beneath her feet. Tearing the makeshift mask off her face, she throws herself into Phil's opened arms, and the feeling of the crow head of his cane sword pressed into her arm as he directs the blade

away from her is a welcome one. Kristin pulls back, yanking her sons into a tight group hug, ignoring Techno's protests and Wilbur's squawk of indignance. She turns to Tubbo and Foolish, eyes wide and brows drawn together.

"What the hell happened?" Kristin asks, taking in the sight of Shroud hovering by Tubbo's side, a massive broadsword dragging on the ground next to Foolish's side, and she turns to her husband. Phil seems grim, yet determined, and he looks every bit like the soldier that once swept her off her feet so long ago. Wilbur's guitar swings in his still-swaying arms, the bottom half of it smashed to bits. Techno's fingers flex, gilded caps at the tips of each one of them as discarded swords shift on the road. Kristin sighs, deep and exhausted. "Where are the others?"

"Here!" Puffy's voice calls from behind them, and Kristin whirls to spot her and Sally over by the end of the street, the two of them jogging over. Puffy's got an axe slung over her shoulder, and Sally's baseball bat is tucked under her arm, nails sticking out of the end of it. Kristin's body slumps a bit in relief, glad that the non-former-villains are fine, at the very least. Puffy smiles wryly. "It was a real bitch to get over here."

"You're telling me," Kristin says, shaking her head.

"Uh, not to interrupt," Wilbur says with the air of someone who very much means to interrupt, "but what the *fuck* is on your back, Mum?"

Kristin blinks, and she looks down at the strap of the rocket launcher on her chest. "Oh, right, here," she says, handing her gun over to Phil and slipping the rocket launcher off, carefully turning it over to Puffy. She meets Puffy's eyes with a somber smile. "Figured if anybody can make use of this thing, it's you."

"We're probably gonna need it," Sally says, brows furrowed. Kristin watches as she turns to Wilbur, hands on his arms as she looks him over. "You alright?"

Wilbur nods. "Yeah," he says, something dark in his eyes as he lifts the remnants of his guitar, and Sally's shoulders sag. Wilbur's hands tremble. "But, uh... I think I'm gonna need a real weapon."

Kristin looks to Phil, who steps forward, arms crossed and a frown etched on his face. "We need a new plan, and we need one *now*," he says. He locks eyes with Kristin, gun lifted ever so slightly, and she takes the spare from her back. Phil nods. "Good. Anyone know what's going on with the robot takeover?"

Foolish shrugs helplessly, and Puffy hurries over to him and Tubbo, their faces cupped in her hands. Tubbo squirms away, though the action seems unconscious as he taps away at something on his wrist. Shroud's little hologram projection springs to life, and the eight of them watch as the news broadcast plays out silently with the headline *ROUGE DRONES TAKE OVER LONDON* scrolling repeatedly underneath.

"Well, guess the media doesn't know either," Puffy mumbles.

"Is that good or bad for us?" Foolish asks, glancing back and forth between Kristin, Tubbo, and Puffy. "It's bad...? Or-no, it's good?"

"It doesn't necessarily mean anything," Phil says carefully, "but it *does* mean that a supervillain hasn't been seen with them. At least... not yet."

Techno crosses his arms and flexes his fingers again. "What, are you saying this is Dream's way of doin' something *quietly*?" he asks. He tilts his head with a raised brow. "I mean, I guess subtlety isn't exactly his thing, so... checks out."

Kristin scowls, trying to shake the feeling that something's off about this whole thing. "I say we storm the place," she says. When more than one person in the group looks at her like she's crazy-she'd expected it from Wilbur, not so much from Tubbo and Phil-she clicks her tongue and puts her hands on her hips. "Look, all bets are off. We have no way of knowing whether they've heard our plans, so the best course of action is to throw all that shit to the wind. They're expecting us to be careful, to take the path of least resistance."

"They're not going to expect an ambush," Tubbo concedes, catching on, and Kristin nods. He gives her a determined sort of nod back and opens a palm. "Alright, let's go, then. I need one of those pistols."

Puffy steps forward, scoffing. "Absolutely not," she says firmly. "You're staying here, where you're *safe*."

Already knowing that this exchange is fruitless, Kristin watches Tubbo puff himself up like a pissed-off bird and scowl up at her. "You want me to *stay*?! That's *my* best friend in danger, like hell I'm just gonna sit here and-"

"It's not safe-!"

"I know that! Don't you think I'm *well* aware?! I'm the one who's been combing through the schematics of these things while you all got the rundown, I'm the one who's lost *days*' worth of sleep scouring for weak spots in the security measures, and *I'm* the one who's *been* Spider-Man's replacement!" Tubbo snaps, jaw set, and Kristin quickly moves forward to deescalate, only for Tubbo to round on her. "The only way I'm staying here is if you lot fucking *kill* me."

Kristin bites back the anger at his impulsiveness, and she reminds herself that he's probably scared, just like the rest of them, both for Tommy and the group. "I get that," she says gently, "but someone needs to stay behind, just in case something happens in the scuffle, and we have to send Tommy back here without us."

"It's not gonna be me," Tubbo says firmly. "I know that facility's security codes and procedures inside and out, and you won't get anywhere without me and Shroud."

"That's... true," Phil admits, and Tubbo finally seems to settle down a bit. Phil looks around the group, and Kristin knows he's coming to the same idea she has. Phil turns to Wilbur with a sad smile. "Mate-"

"Not me," Wilbur says, shakily, and Kristin puts a hand on his arm. "You can't expect me to stay behind, not when it's my little brother out there-"

"I know," Kristin says, "and we need all the manpower we can get, but... Wil-"

"You don't know how to handle a weapon," Techno says, and Kristin gives him an exasperated sort of look. Techno shrugs. "Nothin'

against you, but you *are* the best suited for holding down the fort while we head out.”

Sally hands her bat to Wilbur, a determined look in her eye. “He’ll get home safe,” she promises, and Wilbur takes the bat with a shaky hand. Kristin hands Sally a pistol, and Sally smiles. She nods towards the bat. “You keep the house safe with that in the meantime, alright?”

Though Kristin can tell Wilbur’s unhappy about it, she knows that *he* knows time is of the essence, and this is a sacrifice he’s clearly willing to make. “Alright,” Wilbur says, turning to the rest of them, “go on, then. Bring him home.”

Tubbo whistles, and Shroud flits around, handing out gas masks with its little metal legs to each of them. “Let’s go,” Tubbo says, pulling his mask over his face, and they all follow suit, Kristin giving a quick squeeze to Wilbur’s arm as they clamber into the car, probably more cramped than strictly necessary, and Kristin grabs her spare pair of sneakers from under the seat. Tubbo, from his spot in the backseat, nods to Phil, who’s settled behind the wheel. “Address should be up on your GPS already.”

“Who still uses a GPS when you can just use your phone?” Foolish asks, and Techno gives him an amused huff.

“Old men who are oddly attached to theirs,” he says, and Kristin rolls her eyes.

“Just drive,” Puffy sighs, and Phil does, quietly focused in a way Kristin hasn’t seen him in a long time, and they peel out of the neighborhood.

Kristin perches her gun in the window, ready for any incoming drones. “Keep your eyes peeled,” Kristin tells the rest of the group, and she sees Techno flex his hands in her periphery, the swords balanced precariously in his lap shifting ever-so-slightly.

“Shroud’s on top of the car, but if any drones push past him, we’ll have to take them down,” Tubbo says, tapping away at his wrist-device-thingy that Kristin doesn’t quite understand, and Foolish

leans over to watch him, a perplexed expression on his face.

Phil tears down the streets of the city, and Shroud's turrets start to whirl above them, gunfire sounding out as drones start to swarm the car. Kristin fires at the horde of the damn things, hoping to ease some of the burden off of Shroud, even as it seems to be holding its own. More drones start to swarm them, and her brows furrow in slight confusion as they form a misshapen semicircle behind the car.

"The formations are messy," Techno says. "This isn't Dream's work."

"I sent off a message to Quackity. The distraction squad's running interference," Tubbo tells them, and he looks up, frantic. "Phil, you need to speed up. Like, *now*."

"I can't go any faster without risking our safety," Phil tells him, face drawn into a grim scowl.

Foolish sucks in a breath through his teeth. "I mean, our safety's already kinda at risk, don't you think?" he asks, but before anyone can argue further, the car jerks suddenly and starts to wobble, skidding to a stop.

"Shit," Kristin mutters, "they blew out our tire."

"There's more of them, they're coming in droves," Techno warns, neck craned as he looks out the back window.

Tubbo swears under his breath. "Get away from the windows," he warns, and they do, ducking down. "They've definitely been told to target the car, which means their directive could switch to *us* at any moment."

"Pass me a rocket," Puffy whispers, and Kristin hands her one, "I've got an idea. Open the sunroof."

She loads the rocket launcher as Phil hits the button to open up the sunroof, and she clambers up to prop the rocket launcher on the roof of the car, standing with one foot on the armrest. As the drones surrounding them start to whirl into one place-needing facial recognition to target Puffy, no doubt-Kristin holds her breath as Puffy tenses.

The resulting explosion is almost deafening, and Kristin shuts her eyes as the flash of yellow-orange light bursts in a shower of sparks. Puffy ducks back down, and she gives them all a thumbs-up. Tubbo scrambles to get out of the car first. "C'mon, let's go, let's go, we haven't got any time to waste!" he shouts, and the rest of them hurry to follow.

Kristin watches with wide eyes as more drones start to fly towards them. "Go," Techno tells her, nodding to Foolish and Phil as he raises a hand, and with it, his swords. "We've got this."

"Bring him home, love," Phil tells her, unsheathing his cane sword, and Kristin gives his hand a squeeze before gesturing for Tubbo, Sally, and Puffy to follow her.

"I say we kill him on sight," Tubbo says, and Kristin agrees with him, even if she's a little concerned for his mental well-being at the moment.

Puffy says nothing, but her grip on the rocket launcher tightens, and Sally clicks the safety off on her pistol, firing at a rogue drone. It falls pitifully to the ground, and the four of them keep moving, drawing ever-closer to the building. A wave of drones comes out from an alleyway, and Tubbo taps something on his wrist; Shroud comes flying toward them, a little worse for wear but still kicking, and the drones fall to the ground as Shroud's leg shifts into a whirring blade and slices them in half.

"Nice work," Kristin tells Tubbo, who smiles wryly at her.

The four of them step over the wreckage of the drones and the building looms over them, straight ahead. There's a cloaked figure in front of the doors, and drones start to crash out of its windows from several different floors. Puffy steps out ahead of them, hoisting the rocket launcher onto her shoulder, and Kristin hands her a rocket.

Puffy's hands move deftly as she loads it into the rocket, one eye squinted shut and the other narrowed as she takes aim at the approaching swarm, finger cocked on the trigger. She plants her feet, shoes digging into the pavement as her jaw clenches, and the launcher fires, all of them clamping hands over their ears as the

drones explode into a massive cloud of spores.

Thank God that Tubbo had thought ahead with these gas masks.

The four of them step through the cloud, and Tubbo's the one to fire off some rounds at the retreating figure via Shroud, and they fall, clutching their shoulder as they slump down against the front of the building. Kristin takes the lead, the other three by her side as they clear through the cloud to find none other than George in a pathetic heap on the ground, mask cracked and supervillain garb slightly singed from the explosion.

Kristin crouches down and tilts George's chin up with the barrel of her gun, forcing him to look her in the eye. "Right now, the only thing standing between you and a slow, painful death is the mercy I *allow* myself to give you. And with each passing *second* that goes by without you telling me where my kid is," she says, watching the fear flood his eyes as her finger presses slightly on the trigger, "my patience ebbs away, and with it goes the last crumbs of patience I have left for you."

George's jaw quivers. It's miniscule, but Kristin spots it anyway. She presses the cold metal further into the underside of his chin and wonders how many times he's done this to her son, wonders just how often he'd made Tommy fear for his life the way she's making him fear for his own now. "I don't know where the kid is," George says through gritted teeth. Kristin shifts the gun to shoot the empty spot right next to his neck, and George grows frantic. "I swear! I swear I don't know where he is, w-we thought he was with you!"

Kristin freezes.

Wilbur sulks at the window of his old bedroom, eyes fixated on the spot his guitar used to occupy. It's in bits now, shreds of wood scattered across the road. He's fine with that; at least it had gone out protecting the people Wilbur cares about. Not that the people in question really *need* protecting, but still. Sally's baseball bat sits by his feet, and Wilbur eyes it warily. Sally is a good bit stronger than he is, and it's *heavy*. He's not entirely sure he even wants to bother

trying to defend the house at this point. It'll probably end up a futile effort anyway.

There's a slight thump from downstairs, and Wilbur's hackles raise.

Well, so much for not having to heave that bat up.

Carefully wielding it as he makes his way out of his old room and into the hallway, Wilbur tries to strain his ears to try and hear what's going on. It doesn't seem like everyone's back yet-he's pretty sure there'd be much more commotion if they were. He steps down the staircase, avoiding the creaky stair three up from the bottom.

The noise is coming from the kitchen. Wilbur takes a deep breath and carefully makes his way over to the doorway, hesitating with every shuffle of... fabric? Wrappers? What the hell is going *on*? Maybe a raccoon or something's gotten in. He glances down at the floor, blinking in surprise at the sight of a beam of light cast across the floorboards.

The fridge must be open. Wilbur figures as much, given that there's some prepackaged food scattered across the ground, along with something that looks like a long, flexible, plastic tube with a piece of tape on the end of it. He steps closer, finally able to see around the doorway to the kitchen, and his grip on the baseball bat tightens at the sight of someone obscured by the fridge door, halfway inside the damn thing as they rummage through it.

Wilbur takes another step forward, mentally chastising himself as his foot nudges one of the wrappers on the ground. A plasticky crinkle sounds out in the kitchen, and the figure in the fridge stiffens, their knees wobbling as they straighten up, staring at him with fear, their dull, grey-ish eyes making Wilbur's heart stop in his chest.

"Please don't hurt me, I-I was just hungry, I've been-I was wandering, a-and I didn't think anyone was home, please, *please* just-"

"Tommy?" Wilbur asks softly, baseball bat clattering to the floor.

Been a while, huh? My bad.

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